DOINGWHATWORKS

Assessing College Readiness

David T. Conley, Ph.D. • February 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College
Practice: Assess and Intervene

Highlights

- Dr. David Conley describes features of high schools that are successful at creating college readiness and a college-going culture. Such features include the central purpose of the school being to prepare for college; opportunities to visit or take classes at a local college campus; counseling departments focused on getting students prepared; planning with students that begins in ninth grade; and support services and options for students with specific needs.

- Dr. Conley argues that new methods of assessments are needed, particularly those that measure thinking skills, content knowledge, academic behaviors, and college knowledge. Schools need to align their college-going curriculum with appropriate assessments.

About the Interviewee

Dr. David T. Conley is professor of educational policy and leadership in the College of Education, University of Oregon. He is the founder and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research (CEPR) at the University of Oregon and founder and chief executive officer of the Educational Policy Improvement

Center (EPIC), a 501(c)3 not-for-profit educational research organization. CEPR and EPIC conduct research on issues related to college readiness, college and high school course content analysis, high school–college alignment and transition, and large-scale diagnosis and assessment of college readiness. Dr. Conley serves on numerous technical and advisory panels, consults with educational agencies nationally and internationally, and is a frequent speaker at national and regional meetings of education professionals and policymakers.

Full Transcript

Hi, my name is Dave Conley, and I am a professor at the University of Oregon. I am the founder and the director of the Center for Educational Policy Research and the Educational Policy Improvement Center, both located here in Eugene, Oregon.

A number of schools really have, I think, distinguished themselves in developing programs that are much more aligned, much more focused on career and college readiness—creating a college-going culture within their schools, aligning assignments and creating policies so that students move from high school to college with some feedback and readiness, creating greater and closer connections to their postsecondary institutions locally. We studied 38 of those schools and brought up the results of it in a publication entitled *Creating College Readiness*. Those schools are all types, from small to very large, rural to urban. In general, what we see is the teachers there agree that the purpose of high school is to prepare kids for postsecondary education—that's the central purpose. We see very specific programs where students get exposed to postsecondary education while they are still in high school; they get to visit the campus or they get to work with a college instructor or college students. We see that the counseling departments are really much more clearly oriented towards getting students the information they need, because college readiness is information-heavy. It requires a lot of what we call privileged knowledge, information that you are not going to have unless somebody helps you to locate it and gets it in your hands.

Many of the schools that we have studied and visited, one of the characteristics we find is that they pay attention to the students from the day they come in the door in ninth grade and before that. I mean, they are connecting with the middle schools, getting information about how the students have done in middle school, bringing that information into the ninth-grade environment, having an orientation program, setting goals with students, having students lay out their plan for their courses for all four years in the ninth grade, and then making sure that they adhere to that plan or that someone is keeping an eye on them if they change it. If those students start to get behind at all, the schools have support services. They make sure that there is options and opportunities for the students to catch back up, they don't get too far behind. And throughout it all they are introducing the notions of college and career readiness, each year—ninth grade, tenth grade, eleventh grade, twelfth grade—and not waiting until the end.

In fact, schools already have available to them a lot of information, I think, that cumulatively tells you

a lot more about how ready for postsecondary education students will be. I mean, you have commercial instruments available where you can test students: PSAT, the ACT program, the EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT. You even have available to you, potentially, some of the placement tests that community colleges or four-year institutions would give. All this would start to get you more information as students move along the continuum on how well prepared they are: Are they meeting some basic levels of readiness for college? It doesn't give you enough information, maybe, that's detailed enough to know exactly what kinds of changes you need to make in your program, but in general it helps you to see if the student is on track or not.

I think we are going to need to recognize that the solution is going to require new methods, new tools, new techniques. We are going to need to think particularly about the kind of information we have on student assessment in areas like writing, reading, thinking skills, what we like to call key cognitive strategies. Our research has identified a set of thinking skills that really are closely associated with success in postsecondary education. Those don't show up in the grades and the other measures that we have. Admissions tests that we use, they are not terrible, but they are not enough. We need to go beyond a simple one-dimensional score. We need to get more information, almost like a profile of student readiness for college.

Our model really is based on four dimensions: key cognitive strategies, which is how well they think; key content knowledge, which is the kinds of foundational information they need to succeed in postsecondary education; what we call academic behaviors, which is largely self-management types of skills; and finally what we call college knowledge, which is their awareness of what it's going to take to succeed in a postsecondary environment—how to apply, how to get financial aid, how to interact with professor, and so on.

In the final analysis this isn't just a matter of adding some new assessments and getting some more test scores. This is about really transforming the high school environment so that it is focused on postsecondary education and so that we have connections between the assessments we are doing, the curriculum that we have, the instructional techniques that we are using. We need to be cognizant and very conscious of the fact that the experiences students have in high school cumulatively are going to lead up to what they take to college with them. It's not enough for them just to get through high school with a diploma. They need really challenging and appropriate learning expectations and learning opportunities in all of their high school courses. So this is going to require alignment activity that really says, what are we doing in those high school courses? Let's look at the syllabi, let's look at our objectives and outcomes, let's look at our teaching techniques. Are we engaging students actively? Do we have them writing? Do we have them solving problems in mathematics? Are we using formative assessments that require complex thinking over a long period of time? Are they learning to manage their time? Are they developing the knowledge that they need to go on to postsecondary education? All of that requires, I think, a more comprehensive look at the high school program, and it's one that I think we are ready to do. I think we are ready to undertake this. I think we have a lot of emphasis on going this direction at the federal and state level, so I am very hopeful about the future. And I believe that the time is now, really, for us to move forward toward this goal.