



COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE

What It Really Takes
for Students to Succeed
and What We Can Do to
Get Them Ready

DAVID T. CONLEY

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College Knowledge™: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready
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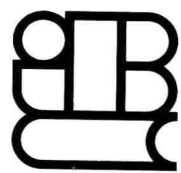
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COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE

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To Genevieve Conley, Nancy Rose Spector, and Julia Conley,
whose college knowledge is awesome.

PREFACE

An ever-increasing proportion of high school students in the United States today aspire to college. Yet statistics indicate that the percentage of college students receiving bachelor's degrees has remained relatively constant over the past twenty-five years, that it now takes on average five years to get a four-year college degree, and that somewhere between 30 percent and 60 percent of students now require remedial education upon entry to college, depending on the type of institution they attend. Also over the past twenty-five years, SAT and ACT scores have risen only slightly in math and been relatively constant in reading, high school grade point average has gradually risen, and the proportion of students taking college preparatory courses has grown as well. How do we explain the seeming inconsistencies between these trends?

The answer can be found in part in the distinction between being *college-eligible* and *college-ready*. Because of the unique nature of the U.S. educational system, high schools focus on making students college-eligible—in other words, to enable students to meet admissions requirements. Students become college-eligible primarily by taking courses whose titles have been approved by college admissions offices. However, these students may or may not be college-ready, which is defined as being able to meet the expectations they encounter in entry-level college courses.

When they enter college, they face placement tests that may relegate them to non-credit-bearing courses. They encounter instructors who move through material at a much faster pace than in high school, who expect them to spend much more time on their own outside of class reading and reviewing, who provide feedback that can be much more unvarnished than what the students are used to receiving. They may be expected to support their opinions and assertions and to cite sources properly. They may find their ideas challenged in class discussions and their assumptions about what is true called into question. Students who earned straight A's in high school may receive the first C of their lives.

For the best-prepared students, little of this is a problem. However, for many students, perhaps the majority, such changed expectations catch them by surprise. They may be accustomed to moving through material slowly and methodically, providing the correct answer rather than the thoughtful one, writing as little as possible, and never ever rewriting an assignment. They may think that having an opinion is justification for the opinion in and of itself. They are not used to being challenged to support a contention with evidence. They may not have taken math for a year, science for two years, and a second language for three. For these students, the first year of college can be a very rocky and disconcerting experience.

Why does this disconnect in experiences and expectations exist? To help readers understand what it takes to succeed in college, this book undertakes a thorough examination of the college preparation process, beginning with an overview of how and why we have two distinct and loosely connected systems of secondary and postsecondary education. Understanding that the U.S. education system was designed consciously *not* to have strong linkages between high school and college is key to comprehending the nature of college preparation and the mismatches that can arise between what high schools think students need to know and what colleges expect them to be able to do.

This is not a book about what is wrong with high schools or with high school teaching. Quite the contrary, the large number of students who enter college prepared to succeed is evidence of the heroic accomplishments of high school teachers, who work in a system that provides them little consistent direction on what they should do for or ask from students to help them become college-ready. The book's central goal is to support high school educators—teachers, counselors, and administrators—who already put so much time and energy into preparing their students for college. The book also seeks to be a resource for enterprising parents and students who want to gain greater insight into what they can do to achieve

college success. Finally, the book can assist high school and postsecondary faculty members when they sit down together to align more closely the expectations they hold for their students.

The book as a whole draws from a strong research base that has been established over the past two decades identifying what it takes for students to succeed in college, but it is deliberately written in a nontechnical style without in-text citations or footnotes that might distract from the core themes and messages. The Bibliography contains detailed information on the sources employed or referenced in the text as well as additional resources for those who wish to pursue these topics in greater depth.

The central research findings underlying the book are derived from Standards for Success, a research project I designed and directed between 1998 and 2001. This project was sponsored by the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted by the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon in collaboration with the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research at Stanford University. The initial goal of the research was to identify the specific knowledge and skills necessary for success in entry-level university courses. The project shared that information with secondary educators by sending a copy of its final report, *Understanding University Success*, to every high school in the United States. The ultimate goal of the research was to enable the high schools to prepare more students for success in entry-level college courses by showing high schools the connections between their state content standards and university success standards.

The book consists of three parts. Part One contains six chapters focused on the high school component of the college readiness equation. Each chapter provides information to help everyone engaged in preparing students for postsecondary success to focus their efforts in ways that enable more students to enter college prepared to succeed.

Chapter One examines the purposes of high school and how high schools decipher the college code. It makes the case that high schools are largely on their own to set their standards and expectations and even the content they include in college prep courses.

Chapter Two explores what high school students know about college readiness. Which students aspire to which types of colleges and why, and where do students get their information on college entrance requirements, placement test policies, and annual tuition costs? The chapter explores these issues and many others related to

where students learn about college requirements. The primary conclusion is that college preparation is a knowledge-intensive activity and that some students have much greater access to the necessary information than others. Schools have a heightened responsibility to help level the playing field in this area.

Chapter Three outlines the old and new criteria for college success. Whereas college admission was not widely competitive as recently as the late 1970s, this has changed as more students compete for fewer slots at the most selective institutions. This phenomenon has sent shock waves through the admission process, even at less selective institutions. Ever more emphasis is placed on merit. Increasingly, students must demonstrate that they belong in college before an institution will admit them. The choices students make in high school are more important than they ever were, and students can make good and bad choices, which in itself is an issue worth considering for high schools.

Chapter Four explains in some detail the existing means by which high school and college are connected and the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. These include Advanced Placement courses, the International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment courses, and the early college high school. These have come into being to provide collegelike experiences to students while they are still in high school. The proliferation of these programs demonstrates the intertwined nature of high school and college teaching and learning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a means to ascertain how well these programs and the remaining classes in the high school college prep curriculum align with college success standards. The Alignment and Challenge Audit has been designed specifically to analyze the content of high school curriculum in relation to the Knowledge and Skills for University Success presented in Part Three.

Chapter Five ties together much of what is discussed throughout Part One and paints a picture of a high school designed to prepare students for postsecondary success. The key concept explored in Chapter Five is how intellectual coherence in the curriculum can serve as a framework for progressively more challenging and engaging learning experiences that will thoroughly prepare high school students for what they will face when they enter college. The senior seminar is presented as a means to achieve this in a number of fields of study. Chapter Six then presents in greater detail what teachers, students, school administrators, and parents can do to help create an intellectually coherent high school environment focused on college success.

In Part Two, the focus shifts to the college experience itself, and particularly the first year of college. Chapter Seven offers a panoramic perspective on the opportunities a college education affords students and the challenges they face taking advantage of those opportunities. Research on college students provides detailed descriptions of what is expected of them, including the amount of time they spend on academic work, the amount and type of reading they are assigned, the number and length of written assignments they are expected to complete, the kinds of thinking they are expected to develop, and the ways they engage in learning.

Chapter Eight offers insights into what really happens during the first year of college, examining the kinds of courses students take and the ways in which the general education component of a college education—the “core”—is changing. A number of examples from diverse institutions serve to illustrate these changing programs of general education. Also considered are the all-important and little-understood placement tests, which can determine where in the curriculum an incoming student is placed and, as a result, dramatically affect time to degree completion and even entry into a major. The chapter concludes with examples of course schedules of typical first-year students at a number of universities in various parts of the country.

The focal point of Chapter Nine is what must be done to create a more aligned educational system. How can state high school content standards and assessments be connected with postsecondary success, and why aren’t they already? How is the admissions process likely to change over time? How will data systems that span high school and college create new possibilities for communicating information on student readiness for college? What would a K–16 system of education look like? Finally, what can policymakers, high school educators, postsecondary faculty and administrators, students, and parents do to bring about a better-aligned educational system that leads to enhanced student success?

Part Three of the volume consists primarily of the Knowledge and Skills for University Success standards (KSUS), which are presented by subject area in Chapters Ten through Sixteen. These are a statement of what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level university courses. They are a blueprint of the cognitive skills, habits of mind, dispositions toward learning, key principles and concepts of the disciplines, important skills, and key content knowledge students need to have mastered. The standards reflect the collective wisdom and insight of hundreds of faculty members who actually teach entry-level courses at

research universities. They know of what they speak when they describe what it takes to succeed in these all-important courses and where students struggle the most.

The KSUS standards are broken into chapters organized by discipline, beginning with English. Each chapter contains two sections. First, and perhaps most important, is a presentation in narrative format of the foundational skills needed to excel in the study of the discipline. Second is a detailed listing of the content students should have mastered in order to be successful in entry-level university courses.

Chapter Seventeen contains material that may be of great interest and use to those who wish to understand college success in more practical terms. The chapter consists of student work samples that illustrate the assignments that students do in college classrooms. The work samples translate the standards into actual classroom tasks. This book contains only a representative set of examples drawn from a much larger collection that is available online. The work samples have proven to be very useful both to provide greater definition to the standards and to suggest the types of tasks that are appropriate in high school to facilitate a smoother transition for students to postsecondary education.

Appendix A contains the Checklist for College Readiness, a very detailed self-assessment that allows students to determine how well they have mastered each standard by rating themselves on tasks they are expected to master relative to college success standards. High school teachers can also use this instrument to gauge the challenge level of their courses relative to college readiness standards. Which of the content standards are students being exposed to in a particular high school class? Which are they mastering? Which might they not encounter at all? Such determinations are useful when planning curriculum coverage and seeking better alignment with postsecondary education.

This self-assessment may be appealing to students who wish to gauge how well they are preparing for college success. Although it may be challenging initially to get students to devote the time necessary to complete the assessment, most become intrigued by it once they undertake the task. They get a certain sense of satisfaction when they realize they meet one of the standards, and they find it revealing to think about which ones they still need to master.

The book includes several features designed to help readers make good sense of this information. The first four chapters and Chapter Seven each contain a section entitled “Through the Students’ Eyes.” These sections tell the continuing stories of three different young people who experience preparation for postsecondary

education in three fundamentally different ways, although they attend the same high school and have the same initial aspirations to postsecondary education. Each installment illustrates issues discussed in the chapter in which it appears by demonstrating how these issues play out in the lives of students. The purpose of these sections is to enable readers to connect the content with individual students they may have known and to see how the disconnect between college preparation and college success affects different students differentially.

At the conclusion of each chapter in Part One is a section entitled “Increasing College Success: What We Can Do” that contains ideas and activities that can be undertaken by high schools. All of the listed ideas have been tried at various high schools around the country and have led to improvements in student success in college. Each section contains activities that individual teachers can undertake independently as well as initiatives that require department or school-level organization or endorsement.

Through the content it presents, the standards it defines, the examples of student work it explains, the experiences it describes, the suggestions for action it outlines, and the diagnostic opportunities it offers, this book seeks to enable readers to understand the important elements of college success and to take actions that enable more students to go on to postsecondary education and do well in entry-level college courses. If the contents of this book make it a little easier for more students to succeed, particularly those students who historically have not had access to this type of information, then it will have achieved its objective.

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In addition to the involvement of the over four hundred faculty from around the nation who gave their time and expertise to participate in the process to develop the Knowledge and Skills for University Success, a number of faculty members have contributed more directly to specific aspects of the book. Both the Checklist for College Readiness and the comments on student work samples derived largely from college faculty, most of whom I came to know through their previous participation in Standards for Success.

The following individuals provided the rich examples used in the Checklist for College Readiness: for English, George Cusack, University of Oregon; for physics

and chemistry, John Halpin, New York University; for social sciences, Richard Hessler, University of Missouri; for the arts, Jen Katz-Bounincontro, University of Oregon; for second languages, Connie Knop, University of Wisconsin; for mathematics, Michel Kovcholovsky, University of Oregon; and for four sections of the natural sciences, Brenda Leicht, University of Iowa.

I also asked a number of faculty members to comment on the student work samples to help guide the reader's understanding of the specific aspects of each work sample that illustrated the skills needed for college success. The following faculty graciously provided commentary, and some also contributed work samples: Richard Askey, University of Wisconsin; John Fry, Trinity College; Connie Knop, University of Wisconsin; Brenda Leicht, University of Iowa; Judith Liskin-Gasparro, University of Iowa; Carol Severino, University of Iowa.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 at the University of Oregon.

Conley recently completed Standards for Success, a \$2.5 million project funded by the Washington, D.C.-based Association of American Universities (AAU) and The Pew Charitable Trusts. This project linked state high school content standards and assessments with university admission and success.

From 1993 through 2000 he designed an entirely new system for the Oregon University System that connected state high school reform and college success. The Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS) employs student proficiency information generated from the state high school assessment system in combination with collections of evidence of student proficiency to determine college readiness and admission.

In 2003, he published *Who Governs Our Schools?* with Teachers College Press. This book analyzes changes in educational policy and governance structures at the federal, state, and local levels.

Conley has received over \$7 million in grants and contracts from federal and state governments and foundations over the past ten years to conduct research on a range of policy issues, including adequacy funding, accountability systems, alternative methods of assessment, proficiency-based admission, and high school-college articulation. The results of this research have been published in numerous books, journal articles, technical reports, and conference papers.