



## Creating a Culture of College Attendance

**By: Ronald Williamson**

College attendance is a generally accepted goal of most students and families. A study by the US Department of Education found that more than 80% of students indicate that they plan on obtaining a college degree (2002). Other studies found that these aspirations were consistent regardless of race, social class, and gender or achievement level.

Many factors account for these aspirations.

- Changes in the US economy from one based on industry to one focused on service, information and technology increased the importance of a college degree. In fact, many employers require that an employee have postsecondary education.
- A significant earnings gap between high school graduates and those with a college degree continues to grow.
- Societal norms have also grown to expect post-secondary training or college
- Federal and state programs designed to encourage college attendance, provide financial support for students.

While families want their children to attend college, not all families have the same capacity to successfully plan for college. High schools and their feeder middle schools have emerged as critical conduits of information for both students and families.

### **Components of College Readiness.**

The components of a comprehensive college readiness program are clear. ACT (2005) identified several practices that help prepare students for college. Others suggest that college readiness is more than selecting the right courses and identifying financial support. David Conley in a report prepared for the Gates Foundation suggests that a range of cognitive and metacognitive skills are perhaps more important than specific content knowledge. Such skills “include analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning” (Conley, 2007). And supportive and encouraging relationships with adults in both high school and middle school are critical.

***Taking the Right Courses*** – It is vitally important that students take a rigorous and challenging curriculum in high school so that they are better prepared to meet college level expectations. Such courses provide the opportunity for students to develop academic skills and critical study habits (ACT, 2005, Conley, 2007, Johnston, 2010).

**What you can do:**

- Since many students and families underestimate the classes they must take to be prepared for college, work with your middle school to make sure incoming students have taken the courses that will serve as prerequisites for advanced high school classes.
- Work with your teachers to assure that rigor is present in every class. Emphasize the need to hold high expectations and provide high levels of support.
- Organize student groups that support a culture of college attendance.
- Ask every teacher to routinely talk with students about expectations that they will attend college.
- Assure that your graduation requirements align with the admission requirements of your state universities.
- Consider requiring all students to take high-level mathematics classes. Such courses are linked to success in college.

***Cognitive and Metacognitive Skills*** – Students need to develop the cognitive and metacognitive skills that will be needed to succeed in college. These include things like intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, reasoning, argumentation and proof, precision and accuracy and problem solving (Conley, 2007). Such skills are embedded in nearly all college courses.

**What you can do:**

- Work with your staff to create a culture focused on intellectual development. Assure that students progressively gain more control and responsibility for their learning including opportunities for independent or semi-independent work.
- Help students understand that merely completing a set of courses does not necessarily prepare them for college. During the senior year students may believe they have already fulfilled the requirements and this may lead to development of bad study habits.
- Assure that the curriculum is organized around a set of core concepts that provides a logical progression and development of knowledge over all four years of high school.
- Provide teachers with the support necessary to teach intellectually challenging classes. They may need additional training and support or additional resources to provide students with an intellectually rigorous experience.

***Surround Students with the Support for College Attendance*** – Assure that every student is expected to develop a postsecondary plan. Surround them with caring adults who provide the mentoring and support necessary to achieve the plan and build support for their college aspirations (Conley, 2005; Johnston, 2010). School personnel can also work with students to

explore the range of post-secondary options. Students should identify their educational goals and design a plan for attaining those goals (ACT, 2005, Johnston, 2010)

**What you can do:**

- Provide mentoring for students by recent graduates who are currently enrolled in college.
- Organize extra-curricular activities that help students build relationships with peers who share their college aspirations.
- Build postsecondary planning into advisory or seminar activities by providing hands-on opportunities for students to explore different careers..
- Provide opportunity for students to visit college campuses and talk with former students who have enrolled in college.
- Provide all students with information about tutoring, financial aid and career and college planning. Programs like GEAR UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search provide options.

**College Costs** – While most families believe college education is important many are uncertain about the costs or how to manage the costs. Developing a plan to pay for college is a critical part of planning (ACT, 2005, Conley, 2007, Johnston, 2010).

**What you can do:**

- While college can be expensive, many families believe it costs more than it does. These families think they cannot afford college for their children. Provide families with ample information about financial assistance.
- Hold parent meetings and work with families to develop a plan to pay for college.
- Provide links to websites that can help families estimate costs and develop a plan.

**Online Resources:**

College Readiness Begins in Middle School (2005)

<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/CollegeReadiness.pdf>

Redefining College Readiness (David Conley, 2007).

<http://www.epiconline.org/files/pdf/RedefiningCollegeReadiness.pdf>

What Makes a Student College Ready? (2008) Retrieved from:

<http://tiny.cc/y4fzo>

Pathways to College: What High Schools Can Do to Prepare Students for College Admission and Academic Success in Higher Education (Johnston, 2010).

[www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/Pathways%20to%20College.pdf](http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/Pathways%20to%20College.pdf)

Research Brief – Transition from High School to College

[www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/TransitionHStoCOLLEGE.pdf](http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/TransitionHStoCOLLEGE.pdf)

Transition to College: Separation and Change for Parents and Students. New York, NY: Child Study Center, New York University (Shatkin, J. P. and NYU Child Study Center Staff (n.d.)).

Retrieved from:

[http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/transition\\_college\\_separation\\_change\\_parents\\_students#](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/transition_college_separation_change_parents_students#)

GEAR UP Resources – This helpful site, part of the Oregon GEAR UP Initiative, provides helpful links for students to look at getting ready for college, selecting a college, and paying for college.

[http://gearup.ous.edu/why\\_college.php](http://gearup.ous.edu/why_college.php)

College Selection Questionnaire – A useful guide to sorting through the factors a student might consider in selecting a college.

<http://admissionpossible.com/checklists/collegequest.pdf>

## Summary

Preparing all students for postsecondary education is an important role of American high schools. It includes assuring that students have the academic preparation for success as well as the cognitive skills and social assets necessary for success in a college environment. The following online resources provide additional information that can help assure your high school reflects a culture of college attendance.

November 2010

Ron Williamson is Professor of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University and the author of *The Principalship from A to Z* and *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way*, and *Improving Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders* from [Eye on Education](#). His blog *Effective Principals, Effective Schools* is available at <http://effectiveprincipals.blogspot.com>. Additional tools and resources are available at Ron's website, [www.ronwilliamson.com](http://www.ronwilliamson.com). He may be reached at [rwmsn@aol.com](mailto:rwmsn@aol.com).

This article is provided as a service to educators by Education Partnerships, Inc, which does not assume any responsibility for the content of the article or the positions taken by the authors or the Web sites or other authors whose works are included. This article reflects information currently available and is not the official position of Education Partnerships, Inc.

Disclaimer: All URLs listed in this site have been tested for accuracy, and contents of Web sites examined for quality, at the time of addition. Content accuracy and appropriateness, however, cannot be guaranteed over time as Web sites and their contents change constantly. The author takes no responsibility for difficulties that may result from the use of any Web site listed herein. Please notify the [Webmaster](#) if you find any dead links or inappropriate material.

Permission: You may use or download content for research or educational purposes, or for your personal, noncommercial purposes, provided you keep unchanged all copyright and other notices with them. No other use of any content is permitted. You agree that you will make only lawful use of this article, and will only use articles in compliance with all federal, state and local laws and regulations. You agree that you will make no use of the research that violates anyone else's rights, including copyright, trademark, trade secret, right of privacy, right of publicity or other rights