RESEARCH IN FOCUS:

Strategies for College & Career Readiness

INTRODUCTION

Communities in Oklahoma are no different than other communities in their desire to see more students graduate and pursue postsecondary opportunities. These opportunities might include four-year degrees or any other formal instruction beyond high school. With additional education, students have significantly better opportunities for upward career mobility and earning a living wage (Okerson, 2016) and open the door to a life of options rather than a life of limitations (CollegeBoard, 2006). With each year of higher education, students increase their prospects for employment. Over the last 20 years, the unemployment rate for four-year college graduates has been approximately half that of high school graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). A well-educated workforce also benefits the nation, making it more competitive in global markets (Stewart, 2016; Okerson, 2016; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). By 2020, 67% of all Oklahoma jobs will require a college degree or additional post-secondary training and education (Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education [ORHE], 2015b).

The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OKSDE, 2016) reported the 2015-16 high school graduation rate as 83%. These graduation rates have remained fairly consistent with the national average for several years (OKSDE, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Trends in college enrollment after high school have not fared as well. Oklahoma's postsecondary institutions have shown a steady decline in college enrollment since 2011 (ORHE, 2015a).

The Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education (ORHE, 2015c) reported that only 49% of the state's fall/spring 2015 high school graduates entered Oklahoma colleges and universities. While this percentage does not take into account students who enrolled in out-of-state institutions, a significant gap still exists in Oklahoma between high school graduation rates and college enrollment. In terms of college attainment, Oklahoma ranks 42nd in the nation with 24% of the population obtaining a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

College and career readiness is a process, not a program. The reasons students do not continue their education are many and varied (King, 2012). High school students need both support and assistance in preparing for success in continuing their education and establishing a career (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; King, 2012; Sherwin, 2012). This research brief offers five strategies that merit inclusion in any college and career readiness initiative.

STRATEGY 1: AN EARLY COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS CULTURE

A Department of Education report found that, between 8th and 10th grade, students formalize their educational plans for the future (Cabrera, 2014). This finding suggests that students need exposure to college and career options and benefits while they are still in middle school.

> *"Students must be able to imagine a future where post-secondary opportunities are possible so that current behavior has intent."*

During middle school, creating a college and career readiness culture establishes clearly and forcefully the expectation that all students have the ability and opportunity to continue their education and pursue a career path. Students recognize the benefits of higher education and are exposed to tools and skills that support college readiness (Stewart, 2016; College Board, 2017). Academic preparedness is central to education and career goal attainment and should form the foundation of any college and career culture. Minimizing or eliminating educational gaps becomes paramount, and this process needs to begin in middle school or earlier (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Stewart, 2016).

The likelihood of a student pursuing postsecondary education is directly correlated to that student's academic achievement, rather than secondary factors such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Okerson, 2016). Academic achievement is foundational to college admission and subsequent success (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Schaefer (2014) found that academic achievement, or lack of it, in middle school can influence high school academic progress. According to the study, students not achieving 8th grade benchmark skills in ACT scores of reading and math were likely to fall further behind in high school, creating a larger academic gap.

In tandem with academic preparedness at the middle school level are academic behaviors and skills that foster future academic and career success. Behaviors might relate to student expectations, self-management, self-regulation, goal setting, resilience, and teamwork (Conley, 2012; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Skills such as foundational thinking, content knowledge, and learning strategies can be practiced in middle school to help prepare students for the workforce, which, ultimately, aligns with the goal of all higher education programs (Conley, 2012).

Stewart (2016) supports an even earlier start to creating a college and career readiness culture by beginning interventions in elementary school. According to Stewart, students begin to fall behind early in school, and closing academic gaps while introducing students to the positive benefits of continuing their education begins the pipeline to future opportunities. Hodsdon (2012) cites research that college aspirations begin for some students between the first and fifth grade, reinforcing the idea of introducing college readiness activities in elementary school.

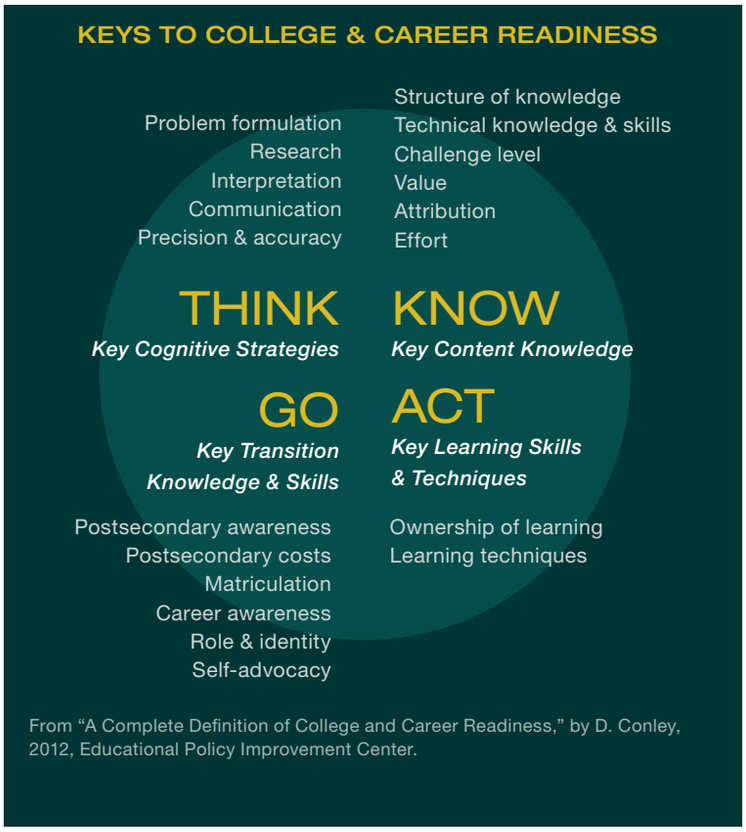
STRATEGY 2: CAMPUS VISITS

Students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate compared to students who do not visit prior to applying (Okerson, 2016). Students must believe that they can succeed at a particular institution, and campus visits allow students to envision themselves there (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). The campus visit gives students some insight into a previously unknown entity. Students become comfortable navigating a college campus and may then feel more effective in college (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

When students can envision themselves on a particular college campus that meets their personal, social, academic, and financial needs, this is college fit or match (Sherwin, 2012). According to Venezia & Jaeger (2013), college fit is defined as being comfortable with aspects of the university or college such as cost, location, size, student-faculty ratio, counseling and advising services, student body composition, and areas of study offered.

Okerson (2016), however, dismisses the importance of college fit, explaining that students' preconceptions of how a college fits best for them often changes after a campus visit. The campus may seem friendly or unfriendly, navigable or too large, and the aesthetics pleasing or cold and harsh. Campus visits become powerful in that they can broaden a student's vision to examine factors differently or not previously considered in the choice of a college.

Public schools that provide campus visits to students incur transportation costs and compete with valuable academic class time. To mitigate costs and time, schools can schedule campus visits beginning in middle school and continue these visits throughout high school. When embedded as part of a school's college and career readiness culture, campus visits become an authentic experience and a natural extension of that culture.



From "A Complete Definition of College and Career Readiness," by D. Conley, 2012, Educational Policy Improvement Center.

STRATEGY 3: DIRECT ADMISSION ASSISTANCE

College admission processes are complex. Many students have no idea where to begin. King (2012) and Sherwin (2012) both noticed students' need for appropriate steps and guidance to make sense of college entrance. Applying for financial aid and scholarships, navigating college admission requirements, participating in ACT and SAT workshops, writing an admission essay, and securing needed recommendations are all processes that often hamper students in securing college admission.

> *"Alvarado and An (2015), Belasco (2012), and King (2012) all found that minority students, first-generation college applicants, and students whose families have low socioeconomic status (SES) rely more heavily on their schools for guidance."*

In a Chicago Public Schools study, students who received direct assistance by mentors in applying for colleges that matched their needs were admitted to and received financial aid from colleges of their choice at a significantly higher rate than high school students who did not receive assistance (Sherwin, 2012). Traditionally, the role of college advisement has been the school counselor's responsibility. However, overcrowded public schools with high student-to-counselor ratios coupled with numerous other responsibilities assigned to the school counselor have created situations where students fall through the cracks (Cabrera, 2014). Schools that have tried different mentoring or advising strategies and greater access have often found success (Sherwin, 2012). Whatever the delivery method, though, research supports a direct assistance approach when helping students with college admission processes. (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Sherwin, 2012; King, 2012; Belasco, 2012).

There are many ways to go about supporting college applicants while avoiding putting a drain on already overtaxed school resources. Sherwin (2012) found "near-peers" from a local college useful for mentoring and advising high school students on their college choices and admission requirements. These collegiate mentors advise students individually and offer direct assistance in completing admission applications, financial aid applications, and in meeting deadlines for scholarships and college admission. Another way to support college applicants, described by Cabrera (2014), is a program called "Scholarship Moms" in which mothers of high schoolers volunteer to help students in need of guidance find and apply for financial aid. King (2012) discussed another alternative, hosting school staff workshops that train school personnel to act as mentors and advisors to individual students; and Radcliffe and Bos (2013) describe a mentoring program that utilizes pre-service teachers as mentors for at-risk middle school students and continues that advisement through high school. Overall, mentors felt more influential and beneficial when working on specific college readiness tasks with students, such as completing a FAFSA or studying for the ACT (King, 2012). This research supports having skilled mentors, regardless of the method chosen.

STRATEGY 4: PARENTS AND PEERS—THE X FACTORS

Research has consistently shown a strong link between the educational level of parents and their children's educational attainment (Okerson, 2016; Cabrera, 2014; King, 2012; Hodsdon, 2012). Parental support and expectations, like academic achievement, are influential factors in students' higher education choices. Students with at least one college-educated parent enroll in college at nearly twice the rate of peers whose parents do not possess a college degree (Belasco, 2012).

School personnel understand that parental support and involvement is integral to any college and career readiness initiative, but low SES parents, who are most concerned about financial support, might see costs as prohibitive to their child's pursuit of educational goals (King, 2012).

While financial concerns are real, parental emotional support and expectations can have a profound effect on higher education matriculation (Cabrera, 2014). Cabrera (2014) reported that while parents of first-generation and minority students could not contribute to their children's financial support, their commitment to attend college information meetings greatly increased their children's motivation to attend college.

Okerson (2016) confirmed that parental involvement in middle school in both academics and attending school activities directly correlated with an increase in their student's likelihood to attend a postsecondary institution. Parents showed that they saw value in education, which carried over to the value of a postsecondary education. Parents can also provide outside enrichment activities that offer a broader worldview to their children. These enrichment activities, like museum trips, attending plays and concerts, can have a small, yet impactful, influence on college attendance (Cabrera 2014; Hodsdon, 2013).

The moral from Aesop's fables that "you are known by the company you keep" might be true when discussing educational aspirations and peer influence. Close friends who are college-bound can influence a student to aspire to college as well (Alvarado & An, 2015). Students were more likely to apply to colleges when their peers were also completing college applications or preparing for college entrance tests like the ACT or SAT; the attitude of "we are all in this together" increases positive support for pursuing aspirations (Cabrera, 2014).

Alvarado & An (2015) found that students pull from many informational resources when determining how to prepare for the future. Students rely on close friends to reinforce and contextualize this information. In their study, Alvarado & An found that White populations were more affected by their social networks than minority groups They conclude that minority groups are more affected by the school environments that actively engage in postsecondary preparation. Minority students benefit more from understanding the importance of AP course enrollment or honors courses for college readiness, which is also a tenet of a college and career readiness culture (Alvarado & An, 2015; College Board, 2017).

STRATEGY 5: A SYSTEMIC DELIVERY

Low SES students, first-generation college-going students, and minority populations rely on schools to prepare them for higher education (Alvarado & An, 2015; Hobson, 2012; King, 2012; Belasco, 2012). As discussed earlier in this brief, high school counselors offer expertise in readiness procedures, but their helpfulness might be hampered by high caseloads or other responsibilities (Belasco, 2012). Rather, schools that exert a comprehensive, systemic approach to increase direct services and access make better progress toward college and career preparedness and readiness (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Cabrera, 2014; King, 2012; Sherwin, 2012).

To address the many aspects of college and career readiness, schools might consider a framework within which to implement strategies. A multidimensional model cited in the literature that can serve this purpose is Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness (Conley, 2012). Conley's model (see Figure 1) begins with Key Cognitive Strategies. Key Cognitive Strategies include metacognitive skills such as problem-solving, research, and communication, which are foundational to academic success and preparedness. The second dimension, Key Content Knowledge, refers to main ideas and important concepts of core content subjects. Students must have an underlying understanding of core content knowledge in which to build further knowledge upon. The Key Learning Skills and Techniques dimension incorporates ownership and learning techniques. A student's ability to set goals and to work independently yet ask for help when needed are included in this category. Key Transition Knowledge and Skills refers to the awareness that students need to make a successful transition to higher education and career. For example, students should understand the culture of college and the tasks that are necessary to matriculation. Students must also be aware of which courses that they must take in high school to prepare for their future goals.

By implementing a college and career readiness model, schools can provide students with a set of core knowledge and skills that will benefit all students, while also addressing individual students' unique strengths and interests (Conley, 2012).

SUMMARY

College and career readiness is multi-faceted. Preparing a student to strive toward and pursue educational and career goals requires a long-term commitment that starts in elementary or middle school and continues beyond high school graduation. Students must possess academic preparedness, motivation, confidence in their abilities to succeed, and an understanding of the steps involved to enroll in postsecondary programs. Campus visits should be used to demystify college and its culture and to show that attainment is possible. Students must rely on schools for guidance and assistance when no other support systems are consistently available. Schools have an obligation and possess the capacity to help students move toward their individual goals.

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