



The Essence of College Readiness: Implications for Students, Parents, Schools, and Researchers

A Research Review



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Executive Summary

Today's high school graduates must possess the skills and knowledge to adapt rapidly to the ever-changing landscape of a knowledge-based economy. According to the Education Commission of the States (2005), students now need at least two years of postsecondary education to be successful in a workforce that requires advanced skills. Thus, for today's students, there is little difference in being "workforce ready" versus "college ready." Although the skill set of today's graduates has changed, today's high schools still look much as they did at the beginning of the 20th century when students were being prepared to work in an industrial economy. Simultaneously, governmental and public expectations have raised to ensure that *all* students have access to rigorous and demanding educations. Thus, in the 21st century, college preparation is a necessity for all high school students to be prepared for life in today's "Knowledge Economy."

For the last six years, members of The BERC Group have studied various national reform movements. Center stage for the last half a decade has been high school reform. Many support strategies to improve American high schools have included developing greater levels of personalization and increasing the rigor and relevance of the high school experience. The role in preparing students for college, careers, and citizenship remains an important topic of discussion in these schools. To help guide the dialogue around college readiness, we began working to isolate its discrete elements. In our experience, many schools and other agencies have a difficult time talking about college readiness because there is not a shared vocabulary about similar terms. Many times, teachers or other school officials freely use college readiness terms interchangeably: college aware, college eligible, college prepared. We have found it helpful, appropriate, and defensible to talk about the essence of college readiness by looking at the components. Having clarity of vocabulary around college readiness can lead to more cohesive discussions and action plans. It is in this spirit that we wrote this research review. Our goal was to provide a framework around college readiness that would allow educators and others to talk about its components using common language.

We thought about titling the review *College Ready? Do the Math (CR = CA + CE + CP)*, because there is an emerging equation that describes the essence of college readiness and provides a framework for related implications. College readiness is generally defined in the literature as the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed in postsecondary institutions or gain viable employment. More specifically, in this report, we assert that college readiness is comprised of three distinct elements: *college awareness*, *college eligibility*, and *college preparation*. College awareness involves providing students and their parents with timely and accurate information about all aspects of college attendance. College awareness is an overarching aspect of college readiness that should be present over time and should involve several groups of people. College eligibility refers to completing the necessary courses required for college admissions. College preparation involves ensuring students are prepared emotionally, socially, and academically to succeed in college by putting their college awareness skills into action. These three elements are essential requirements for college readiness, and they must be present in concert throughout a student's secondary educational program.

College readiness requires having all three elements (college awareness, college eligibility, and college preparation) work together in a synergistic but balanced fashion to ensure postsecondary student success. The foundation of the system is comprised of the underlying beliefs and high expectations that *all* students should and can be prepared to be workforce and college-ready. College awareness is an overarching theme carried out across time and across groups (students, families, and teachers). Between the overarching and underlying culture of college readiness, educators are able to develop school environments that exemplify high challenge, along with levels of high support.

The implication for schools is that they must create rigor, relevance, and relationships to catalyze the rise of *all* students to college readiness. Schools must weave college awareness into the curriculum throughout their secondary schools (middle and high schools). Additionally, schools must raise the requirements for graduation to meet college eligibility requirements, and all courses should engage students in rigorous and relevant skill development. The school structure should foster relationships that provide students with a safety net as they become college ready—which in the 21st century prepares students for life in the “Knowledge Lane.”

The Essence of College Readiness: Implications for Students, Parents, Schools, and Researchers

A Research Review

INTRODUCTION

The role of high schools in the United States is under serious scrutiny. Today's high school graduates must possess the skills and knowledge to adapt rapidly to the ever-changing landscape of a knowledge-based economy. According to the Education Commission of the States (2005) students now need at least two years of postsecondary education to be successful in a workforce that requires advanced skills. Thus, for today's students, there is little difference in being "workforce ready" versus "college ready." Although the skill set of today's graduates has changed, today's high schools still look much as they did at the beginning of the 20th century when students were being prepared to work in an industrial economy.

The purpose of this report is to examine the role of schools in preparing students for postsecondary opportunities and to define college readiness vis-à-vis the elements of *college awareness*, *college eligibility*, and *college preparation*. These three elements are essential requirements for college readiness, and they must be present in concert throughout a student's secondary educational program. The report describes each of the three elements from both student and school points of view and presents potential metrics for monitoring a student's level of college readiness.

The Changing Role of the High School

Prior to the 20th century, secondary education in the United States was available to only privileged young men and focused on a college preparatory curriculum. Although the first public high school opened in Boston in 1821 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), only about 10% of American youth attended high school in the early 1900s (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2002). At that time, many schools focused on providing vocational training to support the growing needs of the Industrial Revolution. The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education laid the foundation for the modern American high school in 1918 by issuing the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. The *Cardinal Principles* stated that the primary purposes of high schools were "health, citizenship and worthy home-membership and, only secondarily, command of fundamental processes" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The emphasis on providing custodial care was coined "life adjustment" education.

In 1945, Charles Prosser (first director of the Federal Board for Vocational Education) supported the concept of life adjustment education by stating that 60% of students were not fit for an academic or a vocational curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Prosser asserted:

It is the belief of this conference...that the vocational school of a community will be better able to prepare 20 percent of its youth of secondary school age for entrance into desirable skilled occupations; and that high school will continue to prepare 20 percent of its students for entrance to college. We do not believe that the remaining 60 percent of our youth of secondary age will receive the life adjustment training they need and to which they are entitled unless and until the administrators of public education with the assistance of the vocational educational leaders formulate a similar program for this group.

The “Prosser Resolution” set the stage for creating high schools that produced a “standardized product” that met the needs of the time by tracking students into academic, vocational, and general studies courses.

In the late 1950’s, Sputnik created a sense of urgency to improve student academic skills. Despite the subsequent improvements in school facilities and an emphasis on academics, students were still tracked, and “the more schools changed (bigger budgets, better facilities), the more they remained the same (low academic expectations for the majority)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Subsequently, the civil rights movement of the 1950s-1970s ensured all students had equal access to public education, and graduation rates improved. However, little improvement was made in academic achievement as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Campbell, Hombro, and Mazzeo, 2000).

Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education on August 26, 1981 in response to concern over “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The commission’s report, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, explained how declines in educational progress create risk for our country, summarized evidence of our declining educational performance, and proposed recommendations for improving our educational systems. Of particular interest is the commission’s recommendation related to expectations and standards:

We recommend that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. This will help students do their best educationally with challenging materials in an environment that supports learning and authentic accomplishment. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

Secondary education in the United States has always played a role in preparing America’s youth for college and for the workplace. However, the expectations of who is served and how he/she is served have come full circle over the last 200 years. Secondary education

originally prepared the elite for college. However, the Industrial Revolution stimulated the development of vocational programs to prepare workers for jobs in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Access to secondary education increased throughout the 20th century; however, expectations for student outcomes and performance varied based on class, race, and gender. Government officials deemed the postwar role of high school as only “custodial” in nature for 60% of the population, while the remaining students were prepared for college (20%) or skilled labor (20%). Over the past two decades, the burgeoning “Knowledge Economy” has transformed the skill set required of American workers. Students now need at least two years of postsecondary education to gain access to economically viable jobs. Simultaneously, governmental and public expectations have risen to ensure the *all* students have access to rigorous and demanding educations. Thus, in the 21st century, college preparation is a necessity for all high school students to be prepared for life in today’s “Knowledge Economy.”

Educational Reform, Accountability, and Restructuring

The literature recognizes that the United States is currently under the grips of a school reform movement based on accountability (Bracey, 1999; Hansen, 1993; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Hansen (1993) summarized trends in accountability as follows:

The current accountability movement has historical antecedents that date back to the early 1900s and beyond. Educational accountability languished during the 1930s and 1940s, but enjoyed a minor reawakening in the late 1950s, during the Sputnik reform movement. The late 1960s marked the beginning of mandated accountability in federal programs, while accountability in the 1970s was characterized by applications of systems models and complex technical accounting systems. Now, in the 1990s we see accountability being employed as a tool for educational reform on a national scale. Historically, the accountability movement reflects continuing trends that have shaped American education and indeed, our whole society. (p. 11)

More specifically, the late 1970s and early 1980s found schools in the United States linking high school graduation, grade promotion, and remediation to minimum competency testing (Pipho, 2000). Minimum competency testing focused on rewarding or sanctioning students for their achievements to battle social promotion and the awarding of “meaningless” high school diplomas (Pipho, 2000).

Since 1983, government leaders have been led and have focused on higher standards and revitalized teaching and learning in order to curtail inequalities in student performance (Martin & Crowell, 2000). The subsequent reform efforts tend to focus on grading schools by assessing academic achievement through standardized testing programs. The reforms create a high-stakes testing situation by linking school rewards and sanctions to school grades. A 2002 study of assessment and accountability systems in the 50 states reported that 39 states had state-implemented, performance-based accountability systems in place that reward and/or sanction schools and/or school districts (Education Commission of the States, 2002). Sizer (1992) described this phenomenon of accountability, assessment, and high-stakes testing as a “frenzy” of reform efforts.

Schools across the country are putting extraordinary effort into restructuring in order to meet the requirements of school accountability policies. Schools are working to change the nature of schooling and the instructional experience that they provide for children. However, accountability is not the only catalyst for these restructuring efforts. Educators have recognized that the traditional model of teaching and learning in the public schools is not adequate to prepare students for life in the Knowledge Economy of the 21st century. Restructuring efforts include improving curricular offerings, aligning secondary and postsecondary coursework, introducing innovative school structures (small learning communities, alternative schools, middle college high schools, etc.), improving teaching and learning, and increased accountability for student outcomes (Education Commission of the States, 2005; Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, 2004). In summary, recommendations for restructuring America's high schools generally involve attending to rigor, relationships, and relevance (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2003, 2005) for all students.

The current climate of educational accountability is driving school reform in the United States. Federal and state governments are holding public schools to more rigorous academic standards for all students. In addition, educators realize that the traditional model of teaching and learning in the public schools is not adequate to prepare students for the 21st century. Thus, a variety of restructuring efforts are being implemented throughout the country to increase rigor, relationships, and relevance for all students.

COLLEGE READINESS

The ACT (2005b) defines college readiness as "...the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed – without remediation – in a credit-bearing course at a two-year or four-year institution, trade school, or technical school. Increasingly, however, college readiness also means workplace readiness." *College awareness*, *college eligibility*, and *college preparation* are three elements that comprise **college readiness**. These three elements are essential requirements for college readiness, and they must be present in concert throughout a student's secondary educational program. In the simplest terms, the three elements are added together to produce college readiness (Figure 1). Each of the three elements will be presented from both the student and school point of view. In addition, metrics for monitoring a student's level of college readiness will be discussed.

COLLEGE READINESS = College Awareness + College Eligibility + College Preparation

Figure 1. College Readiness Equation.

College Awareness

College awareness involves providing students with timely and accurate information about all aspects of college attendance and includes topics such as setting educational goals, exploring careers, selecting appropriate middle and high school courses, understanding college admission requirements, learning about college life, and developing financial plans for college attendance. College awareness is an overarching aspect of college readiness, and it should be present over time (middle and high school years) and should involve several groups of people (students, parents, teachers, counselors, mentors, etc.). Development of college readiness involves developing an underlying belief that *all* students must be, and are capable of being, prepared for postsecondary educational opportunities and viable careers in the 21st century's Knowledge Economy.

Implications for students and families. The literature recommends that college awareness activities begin no later than middle school (Wimberly and Noeth, 2005; Tierney, Colyar, and Corwin, 2003; Martinez and Klopott, 2005). One of the primary goals during this time is to instill beliefs and expectations regarding the advantages of attending college and being workforce ready in addition to providing information about college access. College awareness activities need to be directed towards students and their families, so parents can support their students' aspirations. According to Wimberly and Noeth (2005), middle school students need to create an educational plan that includes the following components: postsecondary and career goals, high school graduation requirements, middle and high school courses needed to prepare for postsecondary training, standardized assessments that students need to take, potential extracurricular and community activities, available pre-college programs, college finance plan, and college admission steps. Additionally, students need to develop support networks (family, peers, mentors, teachers, and staff) that influence perceptions about postsecondary education and aspirations to attend college (Tierney, Colyar, and Corwin, 2003). College awareness activities need to be ongoing throughout a student's secondary experience.

Implications for schools. Schools play an integral role in helping students develop college awareness by offering college awareness activities throughout the middle and high school years. However, schools need to start by examining their own beliefs and expectations for *all* students. Staff members must believe students can and should be prepared to go to college (ACT, 2005b). This translates to having schools "explain to students and their parents the effects of taking a challenging curriculum on their future education, career, and income options" (Wimberly and Noeth, 2005). Changing the underlying belief systems of schools, students, and parents is a precursor to successful college readiness.

Schools should employ a variety of formal and informal strategies to promote college awareness. Tierney, Colyar, and Corwin (2003) suggest starting college awareness activities early (no later than middle school) and revisiting them often. They suggest the following types of activities:

- 1) Engage students in rigorous academic preparation and college guidance no later than middle school. Seek information about appropriate college preparation by grade level.

- 2) Provide students with ongoing information about college and the admission process. This can be approached with individualized academic planners, application workshops, and career guidance. Engage communities in support of these efforts.
- 3) Foster college-going aspirations beginning in elementary grades. Invite alumni and professional speakers to talk about pathways to college, or provide one-on-one mentoring.
- 4) Help students prepare for college entrance exams. Offer workshops and provide fee waivers.
- 5) Supply students and families with information about how to afford college. Organize workshops, provide drop-in programs and publications, and provide concrete suggestions and timelines.

Thus, schools need to first examine their belief systems and raise their own expectations around college awareness. Schools should consistently integrate college awareness activities into the curriculum throughout middle and high school. Additionally, families must be included throughout the process in order to better support students.

Over the years in our research and evaluation work, we have documented a number a strategies to promote college awareness. The primary strategy includes implementing a college awareness program in the middle school years to develop early awareness that is culturally relevant and tailored to the needs of the students. The program is not time limited but instead is integrated across subject matter and spans throughout middle and high school. In this way, students hear about college from multiple teachers throughout their school experience. As a part of the college awareness program, students have the opportunities to visit colleges; talk to college recruiters; identify scholarships; and practice completing college applications, financial aid forms, and personal statements. Students keep this information in a portfolio that they maintain and update throughout middle and high school.

Secondly, educators should keep college awareness in front of students at all times. Middle and high school personnel have done this by developing a college information center within the library, placing posters of colleges throughout the school, developing college bulletin boards in the hallway, and displaying teachers' diplomas and college paraphernalia. In this way, students not only *hear* about college but also *see* college information on a daily basis.

Finally, school personnel have developed a number of special projects where students can research colleges and career opportunities. Some of these projects involve students deciding upon a career and conducting research to determine what they need to do in middle school, high school, and college to move into the careers of their choice. Other projects are geared to show students the importance of college. For example, students at one school talked about the profound effect it had on them to develop a budget if they had minimum wage paying job. Students then repeat this project using the average reported income from the career of their choice. This helps students understand the importance of college from a future-income point of view.

Results from a recent student survey (9th & 11th grade students) helps to accent the need for ongoing development around the school's role in supporting college awareness. In the spring

2005 study, only about one third of the students surveyed indicated they received college information from a teacher or counselor; and these were among high schools working to improve college attendance rates.¹

Metrics for assessing college awareness. Researchers can assess college awareness activities in a variety of ways including: student surveys, parent surveys, school level reports of college awareness activities and participation rates and classroom observations. In addition, effects of specific college awareness programs like GEARUP and *CollegeEd*, can be designed tracking cohorts of students or individual students and matching college awareness program implementation effectiveness ratings with student intermediate and long-term outcomes. Some of the intermediate dependent variables could be 10th grade course-taking patterns, college eligibility, and aptitude tests. More long-term dependent variables could include college entrance, persistence, and completion rates.

College Eligibility

College eligibility refers to completing the necessary courses required for college admissions. Unfortunately, earning a high school diploma does not necessarily ensure that a student has taken the necessary coursework for college eligibility. No state currently requires every student to take a college- and work-preparatory curriculum to earn a diploma (Achieve, 2004). ACT (2005a) recommends the following *minimum* core course sequences for college preparation: four years of English; four years of mathematics (algebra 1, geometry, algebra 2, and one more upper level math course such as trigonometry); three years of natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics); and three years of social studies (American history, world history, American government). In addition, ACT (2005a) found that taking one or more years of a foreign language increased achievement and success in college level English composition.

Implications for students and their families. Students must enter high school with knowledge of the classes that are required for college admittance. Thus, students need to complete the appropriate courses in middle school to be ready for college preparatory courses in high school. Students and their families need to understand that they must go beyond what is minimally required for graduation to be ready for postsecondary education and viable employment opportunities.

Implications for schools. Again, there must be an underlying belief that all students are capable of high achievement as well as an understanding that workforce ready is equivalent to college ready. ACT's Crisis at the Core (2005b) states, "Too few of our students are prepared to enter the workforce or postsecondary education without additional training or remediation when they graduate from high school." Thus, high school academic standards should align with the knowledge and skills required for postsecondary and workplace success and align the curriculum from kindergarten to high school to create a logical progression of skills and knowledge (Achieve, 2004). In addition, Achieve (2004) recommends that state-level graduation exams should be utilized to ensure that students meet standards before earning a high school diploma. However, the floor for the graduation exams should not be set too low. Martinez and Klopott

¹ Source held confidential until public release of the report in 2006.

(2005) make a number of recommendations so schools can ensure that all students achieve college eligibility, including:

- 1) Implement a common core curriculum that includes advanced mathematics.
- 2) Schools should eliminate tracks that are not academically rigorous.
- 3) Schools should systematically identify academically unprepared freshman, so [faculty members] may help them accelerate their learning.
- 4) The K-12 and postsecondary systems should work together to align high school curricula and college enrollment requirements.

Thus, requirements for graduation must be raised to match college eligibility requirements, and low-level courses and programs must be eliminated. Students will follow the “path of least resistance,” so achievement must be raised. Over the last several years, we have seen schools do just that. We have documented efforts in schools that have made a number of changes within the system to ensure that all students graduating from high school are college eligible. These changes include raising expectations for all students, eliminating lower-level classes, aligning graduation requirements with state college entrance requirements, and eliminating traditional “dual track” systems. Determining the extent to which a school is graduating students college-eligible is fundamental. Student surveys often reveal 70% of the students want to and plan to attend college; however, only 35% – 40% graduate eligible to do so. Most often, they are not eligible due to math and foreign language.

Metrics for assessing college eligibility. Researchers can assess college eligibility in a variety of ways, including: course offering studies, 10th grade transcript studies for assessing “on track” for graduation, 12th grade transcript studies for assessing college eligibility upon graduation, and ACT’s college readiness benchmarks from the ACT Assessment®.

College Preparation

A student who is prepared adequately for college will be able to enroll in college and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing courses at postsecondary institutions. In addition, a college prepared student would likely persist in college and/or would be ready for viable employment in the workplace. College preparation involves putting college awareness skills into action as well as going above and beyond the minimally required coursework to ensure postsecondary success. Students who are college prepared also have the personal and social skills required to succeed in the more independent environment of the workplace or postsecondary campus.

Implications for students and families. Students and their families must understand the importance of rigorous coursework and understand the importance of developing advanced skills. Students need to become responsible for developing and carrying out their academic plans and know how to access academic support (tutoring, study skills assistance, academic counseling, etc.). Students must put their college awareness skills to use by selecting colleges, taking standardized tests, applying for admission, and submitting financial aid paperwork. Students should be able to identify and access resources (people or places) that can help them make a smooth transition into the world of postsecondary studies or work.

Implications for schools. Schools must believe that college preparation involves more than making sure students take the minimal requirements for college admission. Schools must require all students to take the appropriate college preparatory course sequences, but they must also “improve the rigor of high school coursework with a greater focus on in-depth content coverage and considerably greater secondary-to-postsecondary curriculum alignment” (ACT, 2005a). The expectation for higher academic achievement also requires schools to have comprehensive academic support systems to help students reach their academic goals (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). Martinez and Klopott (2005) also stress the importance of relationships:

High schools should alter their organizational structure to facilitate the development of supportive relationships for students. Such relationships will ensure that students do not get lost in the system and that they have access to information that helps them plan for and be prepared for postsecondary education.

In addition, schools must include families in college awareness programs, especially in relation to finances. Tierney, Colyar, and Corwin (2003) suggest that schools supply students and families with information and assistance about how to afford college.

Metrics for assessing college preparation. Researchers can assess college preparation in a variety of ways, including analysis of standardized test scores (ACT, SAT, ASSET), analysis of student GPAs (adjusted for inflation), transcript study of courses taken, examination of college persistence rates, school level reports of college preparation activities, and student/family surveys.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

Today’s high school graduates must possess the skills and knowledge to adapt rapidly to the ever-changing landscape of a knowledge-based economy. According to the Education Commission of the States (2005), students now need at least two years of postsecondary education to be successful in a workforce that requires more advanced skills. Thus, for today’s students, there is little difference in being “workforce ready” versus “college ready.” Although the skill set of today’s graduates has changed, today’s high schools still look much as they did at the beginning of the 20th century when students were being prepared to work in an industrial economy. Simultaneously, governmental and public expectations have been raised to ensure the *all* students have access to rigorous and demanding educations. Thus, in the 21st century, college preparation is a necessity for all high school students to be prepared for life in today’s “Knowledge Economy.”

College readiness is defined as the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed in postsecondary institutions or gain viable employment. *College awareness*, *college eligibility*, and *college preparation* are three elements that comprise college readiness. College awareness involves providing students with timely and accurate information about all aspects of college attendance. College awareness is an overarching aspect of college readiness in that it should be present over time and should involve several groups of people. College

eligibility refers to completing the necessary courses required for college admissions. College preparation involves putting college awareness skills into action as well going above and beyond the minimally required coursework to ensure postsecondary success. These three elements are essential requirements for college readiness and they must be present in concert throughout a student's secondary educational program. Figure 1 presented college readiness as the simple product of adding the three elements together. However, the road to college readiness is not such a simple equation.

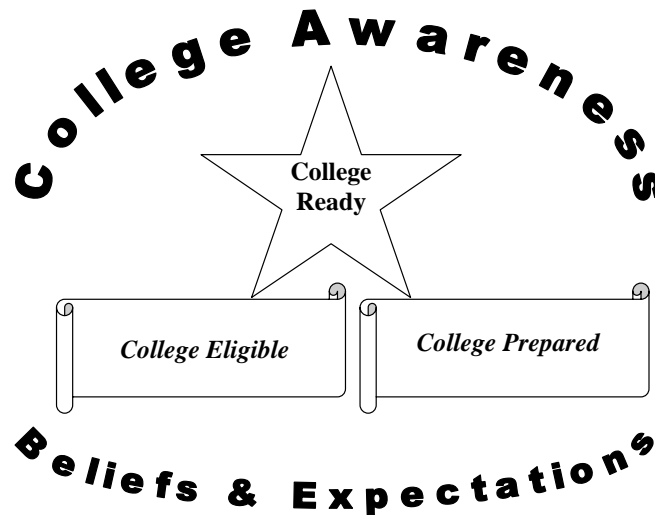


Figure 2. College readiness: Balanced and steady with the three elements.

College readiness requires having all three elements (*college awareness, college eligibility, and college preparation*) work together in a synergistic, but balanced, fashion to ensure postsecondary student success. Figure 2 is a graphical representation of the concepts presented in this paper. The foundation of the system is the underlying beliefs and high expectations that *all* students should and can be prepared to be workforce and college-ready. College awareness is an overarching theme that is carried out across time and across groups (students, families, and teachers). College awareness acts like the balancing pole carried by tightrope walkers and helps them stay steady while they move along their path. College eligibility and college preparation provide a solid base on which the college ready student can depend as he/she moves towards his/her educational and career goals. Without one or both of these elements, the student will fall and either require remediation or will drop out completely before reaching his/her goals.

The implication for schools is that they must create rigor, relevance, and relationships to catalyze the rise of *all* students to college readiness. Schools must understand that the issues surrounding college readiness involve “secondary schools” not just high schools. Educators must weave college awareness into the curriculum throughout middle and high school. Additionally, schools must raise the requirements for graduation to meet college eligibility requirements, and all courses should engage students in rigorous and relevant skill development. The school structure should foster relationships that provide students with a safety net as they become college ready—which in the 21st century prepares students for life in the “Knowledge Lane.”

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