

# More than a test score

## Commentary

By Matthew N. Gaertner and David T. Conley, Published November 19, 2015

Rising high school graduation rates over the past five years may warrant cautious optimism that American schools are improving. More students are earning high school diplomas than ever before. In most states, the rates have topped 80 percent; Iowa, Texas, Nebraska, and Wisconsin are approaching 90 percent.

The problem, unfortunately, is that these positive trends mask some harsh realities. While more students are graduating, far too few are graduating college-ready. For example, research conducted by Thomas Bailey and the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University has found that 59 percent of students who successfully graduate high school and enter community colleges require remediation before they're ready for credit-bearing coursework.

This figure that has been remarkably constant for the past two decades, demonstrating that increases in high school graduation rates are not necessarily good indicators of preparedness for college success.

Rather than continuing to over-test reading and math, American schools need to find and focus on student strengths in areas such as perseverance and ownership of learning. With that in mind, we offer three keys to supporting readiness and enabling postsecondary success: think broadly, start early and intervene purposefully.

### Think broadly

Modern assessment systems still gravitate toward the timeworn notion of the "3 Rs" – reading, writing and arithmetic. We offer in addition the concept of success skills, which go beyond basic academic content to capture a broader sense of what students need to be ready to succeed in a wide range of postsecondary settings. Here are several examples (click on the links to read about how researchers operationalize and measure these skills):

- Cognitive strategies, such as intellectual openness, argumentation and inquisitiveness
- Contextual and transitional skills, such as the ability to work in diverse groups and an understanding of postsecondary norms
- Motivation and commitment factors, such as internal locus of control, self-monitoring and academic effort outside the classroom
- Positive behaviors, such as minimizing absences, tardies and disciplinary referral

These success skills are not just window dressing. Research suggests these elements, taken together, explain more variation in college readiness than conventional measures such as test scores and course grades. Most importantly, these success skills are all highly actionable. Students can do something about them, which is probably not the case for aptitude-based measures. Where conventional test scores simply reveal how students are performing, success indicators provide insight into why students are performing as they are.

### Start early

Waiting until 11th grade for admissions test scores or 12th grade for a cumulative high school GPA is far too late. Students who are off track at this point will have little time to correct course. Therefore, it's critical that we deliver early indicators that give students more time to develop the skills they'll need to thrive in a postsecondary environment.

This concept is not at all novel. Early warning systems currently focus on students at risk of dropping out. These systems illustrate how diverse indicators help pinpoint and address student needs. The same principle applies to postsecondary readiness. Schools should be measuring the competencies that contribute to postsecondary success for all students, and should be measuring them far enough in advance so that students can take concrete steps to address weaknesses. Research suggests that diverse indicators can predict college success better than end-of-high-school tests such as SAT and ACT.

### Intervene purposefully

We're well aware we aren't the first people to suggest that non-academic skills can enable success. The concepts of perseverance and grit, for example, have been validated during the past decade as important predictors of future outcomes. Many education policy leaders are embracing the notion of non-academic success skills as keys to improved success in college and the workplace.

While we welcome this enthusiasm, we caution that measures of success skills should support diagnosis and intervention, not categorizing and labeling. If we think of success skills as actionable competencies rather than fixed aptitudes, targeted intervention becomes the next logical step. Numerous programs already exist to develop a wide range of success skills. Growth mindset, time management and study skills are examples that readily come to mind.

We offer a final caveat that success skills should be used purposefully for self-improvement, not for external judgment and accountability. Attaching stakes to measures of behaviors such as "grit" will likely result in attempts to game the system rather than improve it. Another risk arises when success skills are measured without providing the programs that allow students to improve these skills. Doing so will likely lead to the same performance gaps that exist currently, for many of the same reasons.

## **Postsecondary readiness for all?**

Our three recommendations above – think broadly, start early and intervene purposefully – undergird a straightforward educational premise: schools today should prepare all K-12 students for postsecondary success.

When people argue that not everyone needs to go to college, they're rarely talking about their own children. They're talking about someone else's children. Those children will tend to have parents who didn't attend college. Those children will have limited access to high-quality curriculum, instruction and advising. Let's be clear. Saying "college isn't for everyone" today isn't much different from saying "literacy isn't for everyone" at the dawn of the 20th century.

Not everyone goes to college, and not everyone wants to go, but study after study confirms the benefits of a postsecondary degree are substantial and lasting. The idea that we can consign some people to a life without opportunity for a postsecondary education has no place in a 21st century economy and society where learning beyond high school is critical to survival and prosperity.

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