

What Does College- and Career-Ready Really Mean?

It is commonly said that the goal of high school reform is to ensure all students graduate “college- and career-ready.” But as often as this mantra is repeated, confusion remains over what it actually means. Much of the work to define college and career readiness to date has focused on the content knowledge and skills high school graduates must possess in English and mathematics – including, but not limited to, reading, writing communications, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving. Of course, readiness depends on more than knowledge and skills in English and math but these core disciplines undergird other academic and technical courses and are considered essential by employers and colleges alike.

“I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”
President Obama, Address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009

To be college- and career-ready, high school graduates must have studied a rigorous and broad curriculum, grounded in these core academic disciplines but also consisting of other subjects that are part of a well-rounded education.

What is “COLLEGE” ready?

College today means much more than just pursuing a four- year degree at a university. Being “college-ready” means being prepared for **any** postsecondary experience, including study at two- and four-year institutions leading to a postsecondary credential (i.e. a certificate, license, Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree). Being academically ready for college means that a high school graduate has the English and mathematics knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college coursework without the need for remedial coursework.

What is “CAREER” ready?

In today’s economy, a “career” is not just a job. A career provides a family-sustaining wage and pathways to advancement and nearly always requires postsecondary training or education. Being ready for a career means that a high school graduate has the English and math knowledge and skills needed to qualify for and succeed in the postsecondary job training and/or education necessary for their chosen career (i.e. technical/vocational program, community college, apprenticeship or significant on-the-job training).

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Economic reality reflects converging expectations. Education is both more valued and more necessary than ever before. The bottom line is that today ALL high school graduates need to be prepared for some postsecondary education and/or training. While academic preparation alone is not enough to ensure postsecondary readiness, it is clear that it is an essential part of readiness for college, careers, and life in the 21st century.



What Does College- and Career-Ready Really Mean?

- About 40 years ago, 72% of U.S. jobs were held by individuals with a high school degree or less. By 2018, only 38% of jobs will be available to individuals without some education and training after high school.¹
- Nearly one-half of all job openings in the United States are “middle skill” jobs, all of which require at least some postsecondary education and training. By contrast, those with a high school diploma or less are eligible only for one-fifth of all job openings, those that are deemed “low skill.”²
- It is true that a significant number of existing jobs, including many considered to be among the “fastest growing jobs” or “largest growth jobs,” are classified as “low skilled” and require little education and training beyond high school, if any. Yet “many of these jobs are transitional in one way or another. Young people commonly take jobs in food services or other low-skill occupations as they work themselves through school or toward better, more skilled jobs they can turn into a career... Jobs data tend to treat openings for such positions the same as openings for long-term career jobs, [which] exaggerates the significance of low-skilled jobs and, in turn, underestimates the demand for postsecondary education and training.”
- While the U.S. still ranks 3rd in the adult population (25-64 year olds) with an associate’s degree or higher among 30 countries, we now rank 10th among 25-34 year olds with a two-year degree and above. Competing countries are catching up to – and even outpacing – the U.S. in the educational attainment of their new generation of adults.³
- More than three in four business leaders believe that increasing postsecondary completion will have an extremely or very positive impact on the U.S. economy (79%) and workforce productivity (76%). They also recognize the potential to affect both the success of their company (75%) and their company’s ability to hire and retain employees with the necessary skills and knowledge (75%).⁴
- There is strong and bi-partisan support for the notion of college and career readiness for all students.⁵
 - 89% of voters agree that “to really get ahead in life a person needs at least some education beyond high school, whether that means university, community college, technical or vocational school” (and 89% of Republicans, 90% of Democrats and 87% of Independents agree with this statement.)
 - 83% of voters believe “all students should be pushed to take rigorous and broad academic requirements in high school to make sure they have as many options as possible upon graduation.”

¹ Carnevale, Anthony P. et al. (June 2010). *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. www.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf

² Holzer, Harry J. and Robert I. Lerman (February 2009). *The Future of Middle-Skill Jobs*. Brookings Institution.

³ Carnevale, Anthony P. et al. (June 2010). *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. www.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf

⁴ Corporate Voices for Working Families & Civic Enterprises (2011). *Across the Great Divide: Perspectives of CEOs and College Presidents on America’s Higher Education and Skills Gap*. <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/across-the-great-divide.pdf>

⁵ Achieve (2010). *Achieving the Possible: What Americans Think About the College- and Career-Ready Agenda*. <http://www.achieve.org/files/AchievingThePossible-FinalReport.pdf>