

DAVID T. CONLEY



# COLLEGE AND CAREER READY

Helping All Students  
Succeed Beyond High School

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ALSO BY DAVID T. CONLEY



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High School

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To Herb Kohl, my inspiration to become a writer; to Dave and Vera Mae Fredrickson, my mentors and role models; and to John and Jaye Zola, who challenge us all to be better educators.

# Preface

I am the first in my family to go to college. My maternal grandparents came from southern Italy at the turn of the twentieth century and settled in Toledo, Ohio, where my grandfather became a house painter and my grandmother raised nine children. My paternal grandparents were born and raised in central Ohio and lived much of their adult lives in Toledo as well. My grandfather was a machinist for the railroad, my grandmother a housewife. I am not certain of the level of formal education my grandparents attained (this was not a topic discussed in my family), but I'm pretty sure no one finished high school.

My own parents did complete high school but were unable to go on to college. My mother was midway in birth order through the nine children in her family and was needed to help raise the younger children. My father, who graduated at the height of the Great Depression, took on a series of blue-collar jobs and then went into the army shortly before December 7, 1941. After the war, when they married and began their baby boom family, my parents both worked steadily but did not cultivate careers. My father, using his army experience as a starting point, was lucky to get a job after the war as a warehouseman, a position that was followed by a succession of positions that required little or no formal training or certification. After my brother and I began school, my mother got her real estate license and

began selling tract homes in the rapidly growing Santa Clara Valley in California, now known more commonly as Silicon Valley.

We were able to live a comfortable life in a succession of what appeared to me at the time to be nice middle-class neighborhoods, in part because such neighborhoods were still possibilities for a family with one solid blue-collar income and a supplementary secondary income. The differences between my family and those of my friends, many of whose fathers worked at the newly opened IBM plant down the valley, were never readily apparent. As far as I knew, I was just another middle-class kid. My parents' occupations and education levels did not mark me in any discernable way.

My brother and I attended reasonably good schools, many of which were brand new when we attended them due to the influx of baby boom children. Partly because I am a good test taker, I was always placed in the highest groups at each grade level in these schools, which always seemed to have well-defined tracks. School came easily to me, and it never seemed very difficult to do well in class.

Although the warning signs were clearly there in middle school, it wasn't until high school that trouble began in earnest. My freshman year saw the beginning of a series of bad decisions and choices on my part and by those around me. I ran with a crowd a bit older and quite a bit rowdier than I had in elementary school. In my ability-tracked high school, I was placed initially into the top track, while my friends all ended up in the middle or bottom track. Needless to say, this was distressing to a young person who was most interested in hanging out with friends.

My solution, after getting kicked out of a few classes for correcting teachers, interjecting my version of clever remarks and observations, and generally exhibiting what

was listed on my record as “defiant behavior,” was to march into my counselor’s office and demand that I be placed in a lower academic track. Mind you, I was initiating this, not the school. My counselor, a mild-mannered man and by all indications a good person and citizen (he served on the local city council), barely missed a beat in agreeing with me and then reworking my schedule, with copious input on my part, to get me into classes with most of my friends. In his defense, he did give me the obligatory speech about being able to perform at a higher level if I would only work up to my potential, which, he said, was very high, but that whole line of reasoning meant little to me. I had no idea what my potential was, let alone what I would have to do to work up to it.

To say I was crushingly bored in the middle-level track would be an understatement, but I amused myself by helping my friends, many of whom were a grade ahead and had already flunked the class in question at least once. It wasn’t until a chance encounter during lunch in the second term of my sophomore year, when progress reports had been issued to all students, that an event took place that caused me to question myself and the whole situation into which I had gotten. My social group prided itself in doing as poorly as possible in school, and as each person showed up at lunch with his progress report (yes, all guys), he announced the number of Fs he had received. Each announcement was made with a combination of pride, amusement, and defiance.

I remember one young man enthusiastically exclaiming that he had five Fs. His bravado elicited a rejoinder by someone in the group who suggested this might be the result of his not being very bright (I’m rephrasing the exact language used to express this sentiment). The young man replied somewhat indignantly, “Hey, I could get all A’s if I wanted to; I’m just not working up to my potential.” Well,

that sounded very familiar to me, so I asked him, “Who told you that?” “My counselor,” he replied.

And then I knew the terrible secret. The counselors must be telling everyone that they could do well if they only worked up to their potential. This sent a chill down my spine. Could I do better, or was my assortment of Cs, Ds, and Fs a reflection of the fact that I really wasn’t so bright after all? Being the quintessential Type A personality underneath it all and extremely competitive even when no one was really competing with me, I resolved to get straight As the next term just to see if I could do it.

I wouldn’t be writing this if I hadn’t been able to do so, but that’s not the end of the story and not really the point. Getting good grades in the middle academic track is not a tremendous accomplishment and not enough to prepare a student for college who would be first in his family to go beyond high school. My parents certainly supported and valued education, but they were not at all clear about what specifically I should be doing to prepare for life beyond high school or, for that matter, what they should be doing to help me. College would be a good thing, they both agreed, and I was always encouraged to consider it.

But what did that mean? In the crowd I ran with, no one was preparing to go to college (in fact, almost no one in my crowd went beyond high school). Counselors were people to see only if you wanted something, say, to get lunch period changed to, you guessed it, hang out with friends. The administration considered me vexing and would have liked to have gotten rid of me (and tried to do so a couple of times). My teachers were all very well intentioned, and I think they did the best they could, but none of them seemed to have a handle on what I should do beyond completing their classes successfully—and not giving them too hard a time in the process. I wish I could say I had that

one teacher who took the time to set me straight and inspire me to reach my potential, but I didn't. I did have a Spanish teacher who had, he said, been a Formula 1 race car driver, and he had lots of good tales to tell (unfortunately all in English), but that's another story altogether.

I did get the word that there was this thing called the SAT and that you needed to sign up to take it, and that it was given on a *Saturday*, if you could believe it, at *8 o'clock in the morning*. So I signed up, and that was about it. I had no preparation whatsoever, and apparently I forgot to set my alarm clock on the night before the test was to be given. My mother was gone for that weekend, so it fell on my father to be in charge of the kids. Waking me up for the SATs was apparently not on his list of responsibilities, so I slept until 7:55, when I just happened to look over at the clock through drowsy eyes. It didn't take me long to realize I wasn't going to be able to get dressed and drive to the test site in five minutes, so I rolled over and went back to sleep. That was the last we heard about the SAT.

This small logistical error ended up being much more important when, during my senior year, I considered, however briefly, my post-high school options, of which there were few that I found attractive. Not wanting to make a career of my part-time job at a local gas station or to enter the military at that time, I saw community college as basically my only other choice. In my case, "choice" meant doing nothing before showing up the first day of fall classes to register. Enrolling in what was left of the courses, I managed somehow to end up in the Associate of Arts baccalaureate transfer program, a stroke of luck for which I have no direct explanation or attribution. The transfer program gave me some much-needed structure because I had fewer chances to continue making bad decisions. I had only to complete a designated set of requirements and

would be eligible for admission to the state's four-year universities. In California, this included the University of California at Berkeley. Was it possible that someone with my rather meager academic credentials and lack of foresight would be able to be admitted and graduate four years later, after a total of six years in postsecondary education, from one of the top universities in the nation? As it turned out, the answer was yes.

I will be forever grateful to Clark Kerr, the author of California's Master Plan for Higher Education. That plan, which envisioned a multitiered postsecondary system, allowed students the opportunity to truly reach their full potential by being able to have a second chance that led to higher education. It gave me the opportunity to make up for the many missteps I had made throughout high school (I have chronicled only a few of them here). California policymakers at the time believed that a college-educated citizenry paid dividends to the community, state, and nation, and I hope I have been able to repay the faith of those visionaries in some small way throughout my postbaccalaureate career.

I am one of the few from my high school who somehow navigated the high school-to-college transition, however poorly and inefficiently. My concern, and the reason to some degree that I conduct the research I do and that I wrote this book, is that many, many young people are still allowed to make the same mistakes I did. An ever-increasing number will not have the second chance I had. Those who do often find it much more difficult now to make a successful transition to postsecondary education and complete a college program of study.

These young people will be affected much more than my grandparents, parents, or even my cohort by not being able to achieve their full educational potential. The world they



are entering is far less forgiving of someone without high levels of formal education, certificates, and degrees, not just experience. It is incumbent on those of us who are able to do so to change the system so that secondary students cannot make bad decisions and have every opportunity to achieve their potential, whether or not they fully understand what that potential is.

# Acknowledgments

This book contains findings accumulated over a long period of time and to which many people have contributed, directly or indirectly. My research in the area of college readiness began in earnest in 1994 with the adoption by the Oregon Board of Higher Education of the Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS), which I directed and was one of the first systems designed to admit students to college based on demonstrated proficiency rather than grades from required high school courses. Many great people were part of the success of PASS, including Shirley Clark, Christine Tell, Mark Endsley, Rick Dills, Bob Olsen, Lynda Rose, Anne Stephens, Robert Roberts, Cecelia Hagen, and Bob Brownbridge.

The work done on PASS led eventually to the Standards for Success project, sponsored by the Association of American Universities and the Pew Charitable Trusts, which produced one of the first and most comprehensive sets of college readiness standards in the United States. Of the multitude of people who contributed to the success of that project, several stand out, among them Terri Ward, April Smith, Amy Radochonski, Shauna Handrahan, Ron Latanision, Kathy Bailey Mathae, Andrea Venezia, Mike Kirst, and Rich Brown.

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Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC). These centers have been blessed with a profusion of talented people, to all of whom I owe a debt of gratitude. I mention here only a few of the original group that worked on some of the initial research studies: Katharine Gallagher, Holly Langan, Kirsten Aspengren, Odile Stout, Gretchen Bredeson, Tim Meredith, and Tris O'Shaughnessy.

I want to acknowledge individually one colleague, no longer with us, who helped and inspired me in many ways over the past decade. Mike Riley was a true educational leader and visionary. He sought me out early in the Standards for Success project when he was a superintendent of the Bellevue, Washington, schools, long before the standards had received prominent attention. From that point on, we began a collaboration that continued until his passing and helped influence my thinking on the issue of college readiness. He was a wonderful collaborator and a true friend, and I miss him almost daily.

To this book in particular, several people have contributed in a variety of ways. Mary Martinez-Wenzl, along with a number of colleagues including Kathryn Rooney, assembled the school profiles featured in Chapter Five. They, along with Adrienne van der Valk, identified some of the examples that I use to help illustrate the key principles contained in Chapter Four. Lindsay Bradley helped proof the manuscript and, more important, helped keep me on track, focused, and productive. Andrea Venezia and Sheri Ranis read early versions of the manuscript and provided helpful feedback and suggestions. Support for the original paper in which the four dimensions of college readiness described in Chapter One were first presented and for the research on the schools described in Chapters Four and Five was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Finally, let me be sure to acknowledge the one person without whom I would not have been able to accomplish any of this. Thanks, Judy.

## About the Author

**David T. Conley** is professor of educational policy and leadership and founder and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research (CEPR), both at the University of Oregon, and founder and chief executive officer of the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) in Eugene, Oregon. These centers conduct research on a range of topics related to college readiness and other key policy issues through grants and contracts with a range of national organizations, states, school districts, and school networks. This line of inquiry focuses on what it takes for students to succeed in postsecondary education. His preceding book, *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*, outlines how high schools can help students succeed in entry-level university courses. He received his B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, and master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Before joining the University of Oregon faculty, he spent twenty years in public education as a teacher, building level and central office administrator, and state education department executive.

# Introduction

College and career readiness for all students seems to be an idea whose time has come. At the federal level, in state legislatures and school districts, and in an increasing number of high schools, the focus of improvement is on preparing more students to pursue learning beyond high school, generally in a postsecondary education environment. Although the idea that high schools should prepare students for college and careers is hardly novel, what *is* new is the notion that essentially all students should be capable of pursuing formal learning opportunities beyond high school. This is a radical departure from the comprehensive high school model that was designed to funnel students into tracks that led to very different futures and potential careers—some that required additional education and many others that did not.

## **SHOULD AND CAN TODAY'S HIGH SCHOOLS PREPARE ALL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS?**

Should all students be prepared to go to a four-year or two-year college? This straightforward yet potentially volatile question yields strong emotional reactions from high school educators, parents, and business leaders throughout the country. Although no one wants to be accused of closing off opportunities to young people, many educators observe that

their students do not seem interested in doing the work necessary to be ready for postsecondary studies. Perhaps it makes more sense to help these students prepare for productive lives in endeavors that may not necessarily require education beyond a high school diploma.

The dilemma that this point of view highlights is that a choice is being made about a student's life and future. We expect students to make conscious choices whether to pursue college eligibility early in high school, essentially at age fourteen or fifteen. Those who do not choose courses wisely in their freshman and sophomore years find it difficult, even impossible, to be eligible for many colleges. Students make these choices with little guidance from adults and even less awareness of the long-term consequences of these choices. The real underlying issue is whether a decision of this nature should be left solely or primarily to students in the first place and whether the adults really know enough about student potential and capabilities to make such choices for them.

This does not necessarily mean all students should be compelled to pursue a single educational pathway, although a strong case can be made for a set of common core expectations for all students. The question is whether high school programs can be designed in a way that no matter what decision a student makes, the result will be that the student is eligible to pursue a two- or four-year program of postsecondary study and will be likely to succeed in such a program.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the American high school was carefully and systematically designed to offer students a range of equally valuable choices (the more idealistic spin) or to track students into distinctly different futures (the more cynical spin). The fundamental assumption of the comprehensive high school model, the

backbone of the twentieth-century American secondary school, is that students have different interests and abilities and that high schools should offer a range of programs in response to these differences. Students then make intelligent choices guided by an enlightened sense of self-interest and an understanding of who they are and what they want to become.

Unfortunately, the model never quite worked this way, or, more precisely, it worked this way for only a select subset of secondary students. Many young people were just as likely to build their schedules and make their class choices based on what time lunch was served or which classes their friends were taking as they were to use the opportunity to explore interests or pursue carefully considered goals.

A more serious flaw with the model was the tendency for entire groups of students within high schools to be assigned to particular programs. This led to self-fulfilling expectations about the capabilities and interests of these different groups of students. These groupings over time came to comprise students of the same race and ethnicity, income, or gender. Once assigned to a program of study, it was the rare student who could cross the lines to a different program, particularly when crossing the line meant joining a program composed of students with different demographic characteristics. Sometimes this occurred as a result of overt tracking, but just as often, the tracks emerged based on other factors, such as the availability of “singleton” courses that then drove all students needing that course to be grouped into several other courses together as well.

This system worked in the sense that few viewed it as seriously flawed, largely because the economy and society accommodated the output of these tracked high schools reasonably well. Young people had sufficient opportunity, and even those who left high school with minimal academic



skills could look forward to some limited upward social mobility without additional formal education.

Today that dream is disappearing, with little likelihood of returning. The economic and political forces behind this change are familiar to all. The implications of a global knowledge economy appear almost constantly in the media and in daily dealings, for example. Evidence of the transformation of the U.S. economy is everywhere to be seen. Not everyone is happy with these changes, but few deny they are occurring or that they are significant.

The problem is that today's high school diploma qualifies students only for jobs that do not require what we like to think of as a high school education. This is testament to how low public expectations for the diploma have fallen and how bifurcated the job market has become. No one seems to assume that a high school graduate is particularly well educated. The hope is that the graduate can read and write at a rudimentary level or, lacking those skills, will at least show up for work on time, follow directions, and not take drugs.

The jobs open to those with a diploma are only marginally better than those available to individuals without one. In fact, many employers view the diploma more as a measure of social compliance than academic skills: the student followed the rules well enough to stay in school and graduate, which is very desirable from an employer's point of view, particularly for low-level jobs. But it is not a resounding endorsement of the skills of such an applicant.

While many, perhaps most, high school graduates certainly exceed these minimal expectations, many do not. More important, we have no real way to know the minimal level of skill that all diploma recipients have attained. State exit exams offer some clues, but many are given at the tenth grade and measure middle school-level academic

content. In those cases, we know that high school graduates are capable at least of eighth-grade work. It's no surprise that a high school diploma is not a particularly good measure of college and career readiness.

## **COLLEGE READY AND WORK READY: ONE AND THE SAME?**

One of the great debates taking shape nationally, in states, and even within high schools is not only the degree to which college readiness and work readiness are similar, but also the specific ways they are the same or different. This distinction was embedded into U.S. high schools during the early twentieth century when vocational education programs were introduced on a wide scale. Students needed to make a choice whether to pursue an academic or vocational future. In fact, large urban districts had high schools that were devoted entirely to vocational programs and drew students from across a city to receive highly specialized training in well-equipped settings.

In the intervening century, the U.S. economy has transformed from manufacturing to service and knowledge work. In addition, the range of jobs and industries has mushroomed. It is no longer possible to teach students a specific set of technical skills that prepares them for a wide range of jobs. Increasingly, that responsibility has fallen to the nation's community colleges and employer-sponsored on-the-job training programs.

The question then becomes: Is there a broader, more foundational set of knowledge and skills that spans school and work, and, if so, can this be taught to all students? For those advocating higher expectations for all students, an affirmative answer to this question would be convenient, because it would be possible to devise one set of standards

and assessments for all students and one program of study for all.

In fact, a great deal of evidence does point in the direction that students can and should develop a core set of skills and knowledge and that this set of skills will transfer well across a range of postsecondary and workforce settings. These are sometimes described as soft skills and include attributes such as the ability to work independently and as a member of a team, follow directions, formulate and solve problems, learn continuously, analyze information, have personal goals, take responsibility for one's actions, demonstrate leadership as appropriate, take initiative and direct one's own actions within an organizational context, and have a perspective on one's place within an organization and in society.

To these soft skills are added academic competencies and capabilities that include the ability to communicate in writing; listen well; read technical documents; use mathematical understandings to interpret data and formulate and solve problems; develop understandings of scientific concepts, principles, rules, laws, and methods to develop greater understandings of the natural world and apply those understandings in a variety of ways; comprehend social systems and historical frameworks in order to provide perspective on activities undertaken in today's society; speak a second language and understand better the culture associated with that language as a result of learning the language; and develop aesthetic sensitivities, appreciation, and skills in order to engage in artistic pursuits and integrations of aesthetic elements into other areas.

The challenge educators face when trying to unify the two concepts is that they must sort out what is distinctive and what is common between the two concepts of college and

work readiness. A helpful first step in addressing this challenge is to think in terms of *postsecondary readiness*, not college admission, and in terms of *career readiness* in place of work preparedness. These two distinctions are not merely semantic in nature. Thinking about postsecondary readiness opens the door to the myriad certificate programs at community colleges and a range of formal training programs that are offered after high school. Students will still need high skill levels to participate in these programs, along with a set of work habits and self-knowledge not much different from what is required of a student bound for a baccalaureate program.

Similarly, focusing on career readiness in place of work preparedness opens the door to setting standards for all students at a level that would enable them to proceed on a career pathway, not just be trained to get a job. Career readiness skills are at a level that would enable the student to qualify for and be capable of eventually moving beyond an entry-level position within a career cluster. It encompasses the ability to select an occupation that does in fact have a career pathway associated with it rather than simply taking the first job that comes along. For most career pathways, the requisite knowledge and skill requirements are highly compatible with the soft skills and core content knowledge referred to above.

In short, it is possible to conceive of a high school program that prepares all students for postsecondary learning opportunities and career pathways and not require students to make a choice between pursuing additional learning and not doing so. However, it can be devilishly difficult to create and put into practice a program of study that fully reflects this model. The foundation of U.S. high schools, as noted, is based on students' choosing between educational programs that lead to different futures or having the choice made for them by adults. Creating a true

core program that embraces a common set of high expectations tied to academic performance will be difficult indeed for many high schools.

## **THE NEW CHALLENGE**

Given the tremendous variance in the academic skills of high school graduates, it is no surprise that many struggle academically when they seek to advance their education beyond high school. Some are lucky enough to have completed a technical program that has trained them for an occupation, but they will not be able to advance very far along a career pathway in their field without the capacity to continue learning and acquiring skills. And they will not be well equipped to change occupations should economic conditions require them to do so. As adults, they will struggle with any type of training that requires reading, writing, mathematics, or thinking skills such as complex problem solving, analysis, interpretation, reasoning, and, in many cases, persistence.

Some who enter the workforce immediately after graduation may try to resume their education at a later date, only to confront the reality that they must begin by taking multiple remedial courses before they can progress toward their goal, be it a technical certificate or a bachelor's degree. In addition to lacking core academic knowledge, they may find that they do not know how to learn: they lack the ability to focus; organize their thoughts; process anything more complex than simple, unambiguous problems; structure their time to study; and persevere when faced with a difficult academic task.

The new reality is that students need a program that integrates high academic challenge with the exploration of a range of career options and opportunities. All students need

to reach high levels of achievement and have opportunities to apply the knowledge and skills they are learning and mastering in relevant real-world settings. The challenge is to design high schools in ways that ensure that their instructional programs are doing one thing exceedingly well: focusing on a core set of knowledge and skills and then ensuring that all students have the opportunity to master the core at a level sufficient to enable them to continue learning beyond high school.

Selecting the core knowledge and skills is a critical first step because it requires that the faculty in the school agree on what is important for all students to know and be able to do. This common frame of reference then serves as the space within which high-quality, challenging programs are developed and implemented for all students. Such programs should be highly engaging and appealing, allowing students to apply learning in real-world contexts and to learn through a variety of interactive modes. The core learnings need not be abstract in a traditionally academic way, but they must be carefully calibrated to develop key knowledge and skills. They cannot be diluted for some groups of students under the guise of making them relevant or applied.

Change of this nature will be difficult for schools accustomed to following the comprehensive high school model. As many educational reformers and critics have noted, school change of any sort is complex, and high schools have proven to be the level of education most resistant to change. One problem is that high schools tend to accumulate geological layers of policies and practices. Each new policy or program is laid down on the previous ones, like successive strata, with little ever being taken away. These overburdened institutions have a great deal of difficulty adapting or changing their practices without experiencing great stresses and strains on the fault lines that run through them.