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## School to College to Career: The Need for Seamless Transitions

Phyllis K. Adcock

University of Nebraska at Omaha, pkadcock@unomaha.edu

Jeanne Surface

University of Nebraska at Omaha, jsurface@unomaha.edu

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# School to College to Career: The Need for Seamless Transitions

By Phyllis K. Adcock and Jeanne L. Surface

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*Educators are keenly aware that high school students need guidance to prepare for college and careers. A multitude of options are available to help students, such as dual enrollment, remediation and advanced coursework, and the use of college readiness assessments to determine the desired and necessary pathway. What educators have not yet addressed is how to create successful transitions to meet the needs of each student.*

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A tale of two young girls, both in their sophomore year of high school, can paint a picture of why some students are successful in their transition to college and later careers and others are not. Katie is from a single-parent family that struggles financially. It is difficult for Katie to find the time and money to pay for extra-curricular activities, such as cheerleading and cross-country. She does, however, belong to the speech and debate team because the program will aid her ultimate goal of going to college. Katie works nearly 30 hours a week at a local steakhouse, on school nights and weekends until late. Katie would like to contribute financially to help her family, but her mother insists that she save her money so that she can attend college and live a different life than her mother's. Katie is frequently in the guidance counselor's office seeking scholarships and mapping her plans for the remainder of her high school years. College entrance exams are on Katie's priority list, and she has already begun to study and is prepared to take the exams multiple times. A new program from the local community college offers college credit to students who want to get a head start into college. Katie takes advantage of this opportunity, and by her senior year, she has completed 18 credit hours toward college. One day a recruiter from the Naval Academy stops by the guidance counselor's office and invites Katie to join them. The counselor tells the recruiter about Katie's high grade-point average and the steps that she has taken to get into college. The recruiter invites her and her mother to visit the Naval Academy with all expenses paid. The recruiter offers Katie a full tuition scholarship along with living expenses and a car. Katie realizes that she has an opportunity that most of her peers do not. Katie attends the Academy and earns her bachelor of science degree in nursing. In the next few years, she continues her education, earns a master's degree, and becomes a nurse practitioner.

Jessica is from a middle-class, two-parent family. Her dad has a bachelor's degree and works in an accounting firm, and her mom is a dental assistant. Her parents assume that their daughter will attend college, but they do not regularly talk about Jessica's future. Jessica is very social, works a few hours each week at a department store, and spends her earnings on shoes, clothing, and going out with friends. Jessica

does not like sports and is not involved in school activities. She enjoys going to school but does just enough work to pass her classes and does not take any advanced courses. Jessica and her peers have shown no interest in college and have not looked at possible financial aid or considered college entrance tests. Finally, during her senior year, Jessica's dad tells her that she must take the placement exam for college. Her scores are low, and her parents become concerned. Jessica graduates from high school and enrolls in the university as an unclassified student. At the end of her first semester, she drops out and goes back home. She goes back to her job at the clothing store and works 25 hours a week.

*“ However, today’s students need to have more discussion and a better understanding about what success is and the different ways in which to achieve it. ”*

These two stories differ in the girls' focus on their goals and their individual struggles. Society often expects students from low socioeconomic status to be the ones who will not make it in schools, colleges, and careers, and many times that is the case. Students face problems with future goals because their commitment to education when in high school may not support further education and careers. Graduates coming out of high school hope to be successful so they can get a good career. However, today's students need to have more discussion and a better understanding about what success is and the different ways in which to achieve it. Are parents and schools not taking the time to expose their children to the opportunities and the challenges that they will encounter in trying to achieve their goals? As was discussed in the opening scenario, the two girls are individuals with different needs and therefore require different approaches in guidance to help support them for future success. Finding success comes in numerous ways, including support, readiness, advanced coursework, remediation if needed, and dual enrollment. The possibilities are endless, but a little effort in these areas will make a significant difference for students regardless of their backgrounds.

### **Support for Transition from School and College to Career**

“The United States economy and 21st-century workforce is increasingly demanding more citizens with college degrees, suggesting high school students need to enter college with the requisite skills to demonstrate that they will be successful securing college credentials” (Bragg & Taylor, 2014, p. 994-995). Focus on transitions between these institutions has grown, and, during the past few years, research on school-to-college-to-career readiness has had the attention of many educators (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). Conley (2011) defined college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed without remediation in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution” (Bragg & Taylor, 2014, p. 995). It used to be that a student's grade-point average (GPA), attained during his or her final years of high school, was the guide many institutions use to determine if a student was ready for higher education. Researchers in this topic have shared that leaders at all levels of education believed that students with a high GPA could complete college successfully and acquire a good career. Today, GPA

is not enough to be successful in college and, later, in careers. Therefore, college-to-career readiness needs further scrutiny about what readiness means and how to determine whether students are ready.

GPA is an indication of metacognitive skills, time-management skills, and the ability or commitment to learn and to reach conclusions that indicate the focus on study and persistence to reach educational goals (Conley, 2014). Keeping this thinking in mind, Conley stated, “Not every student needs the same knowledge and skills to be college and career ready. A student’s college and career interests help identify the precise knowledge and skills the student needs” (p. 15). For example, a first-generation minority student who has a high GPA may be limited in the other skills needed to navigate the college system and be overwhelmed when trying to understand how to build a successful college life. Therefore, to help students move beyond the basic goal of achieving a high GPA, educators need to help students set goals for developing a good transcript and striving for strong readiness profiles (Conley, 2014).

Policymakers at both the state and federal levels must realize the changing horizon in colleges and the students in attendance (Karp, 2012). For many years, policymakers relied solely on data collected involving students seeking college degrees to develop different strategies for determining college readiness. This attitude created the one-size-fits-all policies that were instituted in schools and colleges (Barnes & Slate, 2013). The results of this approach showed that students were not graduating from high school. Students who did start college were not prepared for college and dropped out before the second semester. Such data indicated that these students were not college-ready, let alone career-ready.

In fact, in 2013, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report suggested that adolescent trends were discouraging relative to college readiness (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). NAEP’s statistics painted a negative picture of the dropout rate and the unpreparedness of high school graduates when it came to entering and staying in college (Karp, 2012). The report stated that approximately 71% of high school students graduated on time, with only approximately 50% of minority high school students graduating on time (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Researchers have also shared that only 25% of high school students were successful in basic language, mathematics, and science curricula. Looking at this statistic another way, what is more sobering is that 75% would fail in their college attempt at higher education (Bragg & Taylor, 2014). However, there are strategies that can be used to increase college and career readiness.

### **Elements of College and Career Readiness**

In the future, increasing numbers of students will be competing as productive members of society, locally and globally; therefore, it is even more critical for students to enter and complete some form of postsecondary institution to study a path that can contribute to their goals (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Conley, 2014). Conley shared that the “...implications of this transition to a high-skills knowledge economy where essentially everyone needs to keep learning beyond high school” (p. 13) provide valuable guidance for those entering secondary schools.

Radcliffe and Bos (2013) began a 7-year study that involved a cohort of adolescents, starting in Grade 6 and continuing through high school. The thinking was, to benefit students, college and career readiness should be initiated sooner in the

early secondary school years. Radcliffe and Bos shared strategies that build college and career readiness. For example, campus tours are usually done by someone who is a good spokesperson for the college in general, but the tour guide is not necessarily interested in the same field as the visitor. Pairing student visitors with preservice teachers in their field of study would give a strong connection to the campus visitor and the college. As Radcliffe and Bos also shared, a prospective college student could benefit a great deal from having a mentor be the guiding support for helping to find his or her path to succeed in college and a career.

These prospective college students must be educated about college and career readiness beyond the field they want to pursue. They must also be educated about developing the necessary skills for becoming a successful college student, which are sometimes overlooked. Many students from middle and lower socioeconomic status and some minorities need help in learning to migrate through the process of becoming a college student with the policies and steps that follow that process. They also need to develop an understanding of financial aid and scholarships and how to maneuver through many different avenues that can benefit a prospective student.

Prospective college students need not only to be able to select and enroll in courses but also to understand how to determine a major that is in line with the goals they have set for themselves. This can be overwhelming for some students because they have had limited experience in setting future goals, let alone in choosing courses to take or deciding on a college major (Darche & Stam, 2012; Karp, 2012).

### **Remediation for Readiness**

Various states such as California have been working to improve students' chances for success at educational institutions. These states are operating with the concept that intervention at the high school level is needed to reduce the dependence on remediation (Camara, 2013). An example of this is the Early Assessment Program (EAP) in California that involves early readiness testing in the junior year of high school and supplemental materials for high school seniors who are not college ready (Bragg & Taylor, 2014). Bridge programs such as EAP offer acceleration and support services in learning and knowledge on how the college community functions. These bridge programs jump-start the student's success for the first few years of college.

Illinois college-and-career-readiness models include a college-readiness analysis in student recruitment, academic intervention, support services, and alignment of the courses between levels of learning institutions. For example, the College Success Initiative (CSI) fosters the transition for students from high school to college with such activities as parent orientation nights at local high schools, local community college placement tests, and commitment to be in the CSI program (Bragg & Taylor, 2014). Through this program, the students are provided with informational handouts discussing study aids, multiple learning styles, and how to manage their time in the various demands of being a college student. This initiative even offers a drop-in program several days during the week, in which students can get assistance from college professors (Bragg & Taylor, 2014). Faculty from both the local community colleges and high schools provide focus groups for support in basic core subjects such as math and language through writing labs and other forms of support. This support takes the student through the demands of college courses and college life with guidance from professionals from the two institutions of learning. Students who attend the CSI programs on college campuses experience the dimensions of college

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life and learning. Being able to have this experience during the summer before college starts in the fall gives authenticity to the students' transition, which in turn builds efficacy that allows them to take on the role of a college student and experience the demands of college in a somewhat supportive environment (Bragg & Taylor, 2014.)

An innovative program for struggling students has shown success in Texas. These students, who were at risk of not completing high school, are now benefiting from an accelerated pathway to college completion in several schools in Texas. For example, starting in 2015, 193 students between the ages of 16 and 18 began their first semester at The

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as college juniors. These students were typically first-generation college students who came from low-income families where English was not their first language. Mission Early College High School (ECHS) and UTEP developed a collaboration that incorporated academic and social supports that integrated college courses with high school requirements starting in ninth grade (Hoffman & Lundy-Wagner, 2016). Characteristics of their “seamless system” (p. 2) include:

- Students are exposed incrementally to the academic and social expectations of college starting in the ninth grade. This exposure consists of a class called Mastering Academic Writing, which includes writing, note-taking, study skills, and time management.
- Support services and guidance include significant logistical help such as learning how to register, understanding how to secure financial aid, and planning coursework. Students have a venue to ask questions, seek tutoring, and learn to manage time and take notes. The students also understand the planning required for an efficient program of study.
- High expectations and pride exist among students, teachers, and administrators with an attitude of “you can do it” no matter the high poverty rates and the challenge of the community.

### Dual Enrollment and Readiness

Dual enrollment is one of the educational options that has received a great deal of attention in past years because it is seen as a path to accelerated learning within a specific focus or area of study (Khazem, & Khazem, 2012). Dual enrollment differs from other accelerated options such as International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and College Board Examination (CBE) in that dual enrollment offers authentic learning experiences through courses or programs in the high school student's chosen field, which is referred to as *Early College*. Dual enrollment is seen a great deal in the fields of teaching, nursing, and social work (Darche & Stam, 2012).

Dual enrollment has added value in that, although the student is still in high school,



he or she is treated like a college student, receives credit in both institutions, and has dual access on both the high school and college campus for support and services. For example, the student can use the college library if he or she wants to have access to a broader resource base than what is offered in the high school library (Khazem & Khazem, 2012). Dual enrollment courses and programs also act as socializing agents in the transitioning of high school students to becoming college students. Through the process of being in a college course, the student learns the tenets, dispositions, and normative rules of behavior of a successful college student. Later, when that student enters college, he or she has already adopted the role of a college student and is ready to deal with expectations of faculty, administration, and college life (An, 2015).

Dual enrollment helps in that a student who is taking college courses in high school builds the momentum for the transition to college. Studies show that pre-college experiences are essential in the transition to college and completion of a degree (An, 2012, 2015). Also, one sees a change in the disposition of students in a dual enrollment course or program. These students have higher expectations for themselves and the work they do while in high school because these courses are related to their future success. Because dual enrollment courses are related to their focus of study, students are more serious in their learning than they are in their general education courses. Typically, students in their senior year of high school tend to feel less focused, and when they enter college in the fall, they can be overwhelmed. Students in dual enrollment courses, on the other hand, have learned self-accountability and can deal with academic expectations. This has been supported in studies that show students who were in dual enrollment courses were more academically successful in college than those who were not in dual enrollment courses or programs (An, 2012; Karp, 2012).

Regarding a dual enrollment academy, Darche and Stam (2012) noted that the program "...established high expectations for its students: every student would be prepared for the full range of postsecondary education opportunities, and for the world of work" (p. 21). Many such academies exist in secondary schools. These academies help students see the importance of completing secondary school and then moving on to postsecondary education that will lead to success in their chosen careers. Students who investigate their niche as early as middle or junior high school will be able to

**Dr. Phyllis K. Adcock** is a professor in the Department of Teacher Education at University of Nebraska, Omaha. She has served as co-president, vice president, and second vice president of Omega Chapter in Nebraska State Organization. Adcock is also Nebraska State Organization Corresponding Secretary, 2017-2019.

pkadcock@unomaha.edu

**Dr. Jeanne L. Surface** is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at University of Nebraska, Omaha.

jsurface@unomaha.edu



move further through high school and beyond (Darche & Stam, 2012).

Such bridging of secondary courses to higher education keeps students interested in their field and shows them how they can be successful at each level of education. It gives them experience in the world of college even before they enter college, which builds familiarity and a basic understanding of how colleges and universities operate. This experience can build confidence so these students can manage the demands of higher education. They can learn not only about how colleges function but also about the specifics of housing, tuition, financial aid, and special programs that can support them in their college life (Karp, 2012).

Ideally, the courses that prospective college students complete while in high school should not be taken just because they are on the list of requirements; rather, courses should be taken that give authenticity to the learning experiences. Dual enrollment courses that provide a valuable experience to prospective college students in secondary school and later college lend authentic support for their future careers. Quality experiential programs and courses support the students' needs for long-range goals in education and create a fit for the student in the modern-day societal and economic world (Darche & Stam, 2012).

As Khazem and Khazem noted, "Dual enrollment is a successful acceleration learning mechanism...[that] reduces the average time-to-degree and increases the likelihood of graduation...[all the while increasing] academic performance and educational attainment" (2012, p. 106). Dual enrollment operates through articulation agreements between the high school and the postsecondary schools. In these programs, there must be ongoing communication between the institutions to ensure continuity and that the bridge to early college learning is efficacious.

Hofman and Voloch stated that dual enrollment could develop in such a way "to make the border between high school and college more permeable (rather than better policed)" (2012, p. 103). While high schools are struggling to determine what can be done to make sure students are college-ready through key competencies, colleges struggle with what college teaching should look like in dual enrollment courses and programs. What should the rigor of the content be, what should the specific courses be in a particular area of study in dual enrollment, and what type of scaffolding or support should be offered for these early-college students?

The curriculum and instruction in secondary schools and through college need to include more authentic delivery, assessments, and professional development so that students can have a smooth bridge throughout their education leading to a career. The success of school-to-college-to-career programs ultimately can be seen through students' competency in their chosen careers, and for some students, this may be the first time in their lives that they feel real success (Darch & Stam, 2012). Student success increases the efficacy for them to remain motivated and continue in courses even though challenging.

## **Conclusion**

Considerable disparity seems to exist between high school completers and non-completers. What about those who attend college and those who do not? When one looks at the cultural differences between various groups, it becomes more disheartening for racial and ethnic groups whose percentages of success are less than half of what White and Asian students experience (Bragg & Taylor, 2014) when it comes to education. For example, something as simple as trying to get themselves

to campus can be a problem for high school students in lower economic situations because their lifestyle does not support their need for transportation to school, let alone to the local community college, even if the student wanted to enroll in college classes.

The beginning story of two girls who come from different backgrounds and had different goals in life when it came to education and careers emphasizes the value of college and career readiness. Katie was the student from a lower socioeconomic status; statistics would suggest she would be the one not to finish school or go to college and later find a successful career. However, Katie worked hard in high school and pursued avenues to be able to go to college so that she could become the nurse that she envisioned as her career goal. Katie found support in her high school counselor and worked hard to become successful in school, then college and a career.

Jessica came from a medium socioeconomic status with a parent who was a professional, but her expectations and goals were very different than what her parents hoped for her. Jessica was expected to enroll in college but later did not succeed and had to drop out of college to work as a store clerk. Jessica seemed to have many of the advantages in her home life that should support her to do well in school and college, which turned out not to be the case. Does this suggest that culture, personal stamina, and “just life” are what happened to these two girls in their pursuits—or was this an issue with college and career readiness?

It is apparent that Katie had a support system in her high school counselor and the benefit of taking advantage of the educational advancement program at her local community college to gain college-level courses while still in high school. Also, her opportunity to connect with a recruiter from the Naval Academy further supported her in her transition from high school to college and a future career. In contrast, Jessica was not thinking about college and made mediocre grades in high school. For a successful transition, Jessica could have benefitted from initiatives designed to help students to explore possible goals and programs and to support those goals much earlier than her senior year of high school. Jessica could have had help investigating what she wanted for her future and what college could do to support her in her goals during her freshman and sophomore years in high school. A student without a clear goal toward which to work and without the support of college and career readiness will flounder in school, college, and possibly in his or her career.

Successful school and college experiences lead to successful careers. Students need to understand how to do well academically and be educated to navigate the waters of college. Although there are many roadblocks along the way, career and college readiness is possible. Success in education comes from realizing that “one size does not fit all.” Every student is unique academically, socially, culturally, and financially. Once educators implement programs that capitalize on each student’s strengths, success will be much more likely.

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