

Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Creating A College-Going Culture

In a Nutshell

Many people who attend and succeed in post-secondary education come from a “college going culture” that not only supported their collegiate goals, but never allowed them to seriously consider not going on for more education after high school. The conversation was never “if you go to college;” it was always “**when** you go to college.” Now, more schools are creating this culture for first generation college aspirants in an effort to make college access a reality for all students.

Family and School Cultures

For students whose parents or other family members attended college, college-going may be deeply embedded in the culture of the family as well. From their earliest years, these students are told about college, encouraged to think about colleges they might attend, and even dressed in the spirit wear of colleges favored by the family. One 8 year old assured us, “I’m a Tarheel because I was born at the University of North Carolina hospital, and that’s where I’m going. [My 5 year old sister and 2 year old brother] are Blue Jays because they were born at the Johns Hopkins hospital, and that’s where they’ll go. Or maybe they’ll be Terrapins because they’ve always lived in Maryland.”

The culture becomes more sophisticated as the child grows older. Course selection in middle and high school is driven by college plans, family resources are used to provide “enrichment” experiences, academic coaching and tutoring may be secured, and campus visits are an important ritual among more affluent families. In highly educated communities, this culture is extended into the schools as well. Parents expect that their child’s educational aspirations will be supported and encouraged, and the demand for college-prep, advanced placement, or dual enrollment courses is usually high.

As a result, children of college-educated or “some college” parents are about twice as likely to attend college than are the children of less educated parents. While some of this disparity might be the result of income differences, a large measure is also due to the family’s inability to create a college-going culture for their children because they lack an understanding of what such a culture entails. As a result, many children learn that “college isn’t for people like us.”



Elements of College-Going Cultures

[Advancing College Going Culture](#) from the College Tools for Schools project at the University of California summarizes the major elements of a college-going culture that helps to assure equitable access to higher education. “College-going culture refers to the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and their families to obtain the information, tools, and perspective to enhance access to and success in post-secondary education.

Three necessary elements are:

1. Students learn about options for their future, careers and the education they require, as early as elementary school, with a specific focus beginning in middle school.
2. Schools convey the expectation that all students can prepare for the opportunity to attend and be successful in post-secondary education.
3. Schools, families, and communities give students the same message of high expectations for their future.

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In addition to college-going, the broad goal is for students to believe they can have a great future, and that they can plan and prepare for many options leading to a creative and productive life after high school. Students may think they know what they want, but we know their interests and career aspirations may and most likely will change, and they need to be prepared for those possibilities. Students need to know that there are many paths they can take to have a successful life journey.”

[McDonough and Dorr](#) describe a college-going culture as follows: “The overarching goal of cultivating a college going culture is for all students to be prepared for a full range of post-secondary options through structural, motivational, and experiential college preparatory opportunities.

College going cultures are likely to exist in schools where:

- Students are expected to achieve high academic standards in a college preparatory curriculum
- The school staff is collectively committed to students’ college goals
- College is a visual reality
- Informal and formal communication networks promote and support college expectations

Fundamental precursors to creating a college going culture include:

- A commitment from the school leadership team and staff
- An understanding that all teachers and counselors are college counselors
- A dedication to a partnership model of college preparation that includes active involvement from teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents (p. 6).

They go on to describe in helpful detail the *Nine Critical Principles of College Going Cultures with an Action Plan for Building a College Culture*. These resources outline specific activities, roles and responsibilities for school staff, parents and the community in creating a culture that supports student achievement and ultimate college success.

Creating College-Going Cultures

Fortunately, many schools, universities, and collegiate organizations support the creation of a college-going culture in the school, even if it is not strong in the family. Many of these programs also have family components to help parents support their child’s college goals even if they are not college grads themselves. (See earlier *Research Into Practice* briefs for more information about parent roles in promoting higher education: <http://oregongearup.org/sites/oregongearup.org/files/research-briefs/parentattitudes.pdf>.)

According to the [Pathways to College Network](#), college-focused schools do the following:

- ✓ Expect that all underserved students are capable of being prepared to enroll and succeed in college
- ✓ Provide a range of high-quality, college-preparatory tools for students and families
- ✓ Embrace social, cultural, and varied learning styles when developing the environment and activities at the school
- ✓ Involve leaders at all levels in establishing policies, programs, and practices
- ✓ Maintain sufficient financial and human resources for this mission
- ✓ Assess policy, programs, and practices regularly to determine their effectiveness

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To begin, it is important to assess the college going culture in the school and the community. That will allow leaders to target specific areas for intervention and help assure the best pay off for their efforts. The [College Going Culture Guide](#) from the College Board provides a comprehensive list of the questions schools need to address and includes instruments for gathering these data systematically. "There are many factors, statistical and anecdotal, to analyze to see how your school is creating its present culture. Before jumping ahead to implementation of any ideas you or your school may have, explore issues surrounding a college-focused community:

1. What is our graduation rate?
2. What is our college application rate?
3. What is our college acceptance rate?
4. How many of our staff members have undergraduate or graduate degrees?
5. What percentage of parents hold undergraduate or graduate degrees?
6. What are our school counselor's top three priorities, and how are his or her year and day structured?
7. What percentage of our students take the SAT®? ACT? PSAT/NMSQT®? PLAN?
8. How many AP or college-level classes does our school offer?
9. Do all of our students have access to all teachers and classes?
10. What is our faculty's attitude toward the notion that every student at our school can succeed in college?
11. Do we emphasize college advocacy during our hiring and evaluation practices?
12. Does our school provide leadership opportunities?
13. Is academic rigor encouraged for all students?
14. Are students often assigned to classes based on factors other than their potential?
15. Are we reaching parents with information about college culture?
16. Is our school more focused on getting students to graduate high school or getting students to attend college?
17. Is one of our school improvement goals related to the issue of college?
18. How often do our administrators, counselors, and teachers consult college professors and administration about curricular decisions regarding student preparation or ask for data on the performance of graduates?
19. What do we do to promote college information sessions?

After a school has a profile of their college-going culture, *The Guide* offers concrete examples of the kinds of programs and interventions that work to boost graduation rates and college attendance. They advocate both low-cost, small scale and large-scale, school-wide plans to create a "college-friendly" culture, ranging from showcasing the college affiliations of school staff, to make curriculum changes, to providing comprehensive education and training programs for students and adults on college admission and success.

Four Keys

University of Oregon scholar David Conley has identified [four keys](#) for college success that need to be cultivated throughout the student's high school years. More than just academic content, these keys articulate the habits of intellect and personal qualities, that, along with solid academic preparation, distinguish successful college students from less successful peers.

“THINK: Students need to do more than retain or apply information; they have to process and manipulate it, assemble and reassemble it, examine it, question it, look for patterns in it, organize it, and present it. They need intentional patterns of thinking to draw on as they complete work after high school.

KNOW: Students need strong foundational knowledge in core academic subjects, and they also need to have an understanding of the structure of knowledge (the big ideas and how those ideas frame the study of the subject). However, it is not enough to have students learn high-quality content. They need to understand that success at learning content is a function of effort much more than aptitude.

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ACT: Students need skills and techniques to take ownership and successfully manage their learning in educational and career opportunities after high school. In the absence of these critically important skills, students remain dependent learners who struggle when expected to work independently because they lack the needed tool kits.

GO: Students preparing for a career or to further their education beyond high school must navigate numerous potential pitfalls if they wish to make a successful transition. They must cope with issues ranging from correctly submitting postsecondary applications to knowing when to seek help or advocate for their best interests.”

Conley’s Epicenter has developed a [tool kit](#) for the State of South Carolina based on these four keys. The kit includes:

- a definition of college and career readiness, based on David Conley’s Four Keys Model
 - a mini diagnostic based on the Model that shows where a school falls in terms of postsecondary student preparation
 - a discussion of the similarities and differences between *college* and *career* readiness
 - the Seven Principles of College and Career Readiness, along with examples of those principles in practice
- a detailed explication of how the three steps college and career readiness action planning: analyze, align, partner

This kit, as well as others described in this brief, can be adapted to practically any school environment and any type of community.

The Bottom Line

Although the literature is rich with information, activities, programs and techniques to create a college going culture in the school, one variable is absolutely constant: the school staff’s commitment to support and encourage students’ college-going goals. In the absence of that commitment, activities become empty exercises devoid of substance and purpose. With that commitment, students can and do achieve remarkable results that enrich their own future and that of their communities.

References and Resources

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July, 2016