



# BEYOND ACADEMIC READINESS

BUILDING A BROADER RANGE OF SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The journey from high school to higher education is much more complicated than policymakers tend to imagine. For most students, it is a major life transition—one requiring them to take risks that are not just academic and financial, but deeply personal, raising difficult questions about identity, belonging, purpose, and more.

Historically, though, the nation's high schools and colleges have done little to make that transition less challenging. Rather they mostly have left it up to students themselves to figure out how to make the leap and hang on long enough to earn a certificate or degree.

This report is part of a series that encourages high schools and higher education to share responsibility for increasing the number of students who are prepared to enter college and earn a postsecondary credential. The goal is to align grade 12 more closely to the first year of college by collaborating in a few key areas: co-design a set of courses, experiences, and support services that connect high school and college; co-deliver them as much as possible; and co-validate the content and skills to be learned over these two years.

In this paper, the last of the series, authors Jenny Nagaoka and Matthew A. Holsapple of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research take a closer look at the so-called “noncognitive” dimension of college readiness. They focus on the critical need for students in grades 9-12 to become independent, self-directed learners and to build strong identities as future college students. Specifically, they argue

that high schools—with input and support from higher education—should provide students with early college-like experiences.

### WHY STUDENTS STRUGGLE IN THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

The focus of recent policy efforts to increase college readiness has been to boost academic achievement by creating more rigorous high school graduation requirements, increasing participation in advanced coursework, and implementing tougher standards, standardized tests, and accountability systems. However, research over the past decade demonstrates that college completion requires a lot more than just academic preparation.

While high school grades are a reliable predictor of college outcomes, the authors point out that grades reflect more than academic knowledge and skills alone. For example, they often depend on whether students attend class regularly, complete homework, participate in discussions, and perform well on assignments and tests. Grades have much to do with student behavior, motivation, engagement in

learning, and the noncognitive factors that support these things. These factors also tend to serve students well when they get to college, regardless of their level of content knowledge.

Recent research also shows that the process of entering college is complex and each step—from learning about the range of schools that exists to completing applications, applying for financial aid, selecting a school to attend, and choosing appropriate classes—can present a significant hurdle. For first-generation college students, especially, the experience can be daunting, as well as expensive and time-consuming. In order to get through all of these steps, students require not just knowledge about the college world, but several important noncognitive factors. These include being able to manage time, regulate one’s behavior, set goals, and follow through on them.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP NONCOGNITIVE FACTORS

The best-known examples of experiences that provide high school students with opportunities to develop noncognitive factors that increase college readiness are dual enrollment and early college, which also have the greatest evidence of success to date. Dual enrollment demystifies higher education, exposing young people to the norms, expectations, and responsibilities of college participation by doing college coursework themselves.

Dual enrollment is a core strategy of early college, which allows students to complete substantial college credit or a two-year associate’s degree, for free, at the same time as their high school diploma. Early colleges typically provide intensive academic and personal support services to prepare their students to begin college classes as high school

juniors. Early college students complete high school, begin postsecondary education, and accumulate credits at a higher rate than their peers who attended traditional schools.

Other programs and practices are also promising. They provide the sorts of experiences highlighted by the research into the development of noncognitive skills. These include:

- Recent graduates coaching high school seniors through the college application process.
- Introduction of high school students to college, community, and cultural resources.
- Structured internships and apprenticeships.
- Expanded learning opportunities that engage students in a collective endeavor.

Research suggests that students will face different challenges depending on the college they choose to attend. Successful transition efforts will prepare students not for specific situations, but rather help them develop the tools to navigate the wide range of potential experiences that may greet them on campus.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing the role of noncognitive factors in college readiness ought to be viewed as the joint responsibility of high schools and colleges—in a co-designed, co-delivered, and co-validated approach. High schools need to position young people so that they can make a successful transition, while colleges should take an active role in the continuing development of noncognitive factors in their students.

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For more information about JFF services to build educational pathways that prepare all young people for college and careers, contact Joel Vargas, Vice President, School and Learning Designs, [jvargas@jff.org](mailto:jvargas@jff.org).



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