

ARTICLE:

How College is Different From High School

College differs from high school in many obvious—and not so obvious—respects. College is the first setting where we expect young people to function as adults, not large children. Almost all the rules of the game that students have so carefully mastered over the preceding 13 years of schooling are either discarded or modified radically. The student-teacher relationship changes dramatically, as do expectations for engagement, independent work, motivation, and intellectual development. All this occurs while young people are also grappling with significant independence from their families and with the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is not surprising that moving from high school to college is one of the most difficult transitions that many people experience during their entire lives.

Because college is genuinely different from high school, college readiness is fundamentally different than high school competence. Detailed analyses of college courses reveal that although a college course may share the same name as a high school course, college instructors pace their courses more rapidly, emphasize different aspects of material taught, and have very different goals for their courses than do high school instructors (Conley, Aspengren, Stout, & Veach 2006). Students fresh out of high school may assume a college course will be very much like a similarly named high school class they have taken only to find that expectations are fundamentally different. College instructors are more likely to emphasize a series of key thinking skills that students typically do not develop extensively in high school. They expect students to make inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious

answers, draw conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, engage in the exchange of ideas, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught (National Research Council, 2002).

Research findings describe college courses that require students to read eight to ten books in the same period that a high school class requires only one or two (Standards for Success, 2003). In these college classes, students are expected to write multiple papers in short periods of time. These papers must be well reasoned, well organized, and documented with evidence from credible sources (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2003, 2004, 2006). By contrast, high school students may write one or two research papers, at the most, during high school, and may take weeks or months to do so. Increasingly, college courses in all subject areas require well-developed writing skills, research capabilities, and what have been commonly identified as critical thinking skills.

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2006), a vast majority of first-year college students are actively engaged in small groups and are expected to work on complex problems and projects with others inside and outside of class. They are then expected to make presentations and to explain what they have learned. Freshman students are expected to be independent, self-reliant learners who recognize when they are having problems and know when and how to seek help from professors, peers, or other sources.

At the same time, college faculty consistently report that freshman students need to be spending nearly twice as much time as they actually report to prepare for class (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). Students generally do not enter

college with a work ethic that prepares them for instructor expectations or course requirements. The most successful first-year college students are those who come prepared to work at the levels faculty members expect. Those who do not arrive at college fully prepared are significantly less likely to progress beyond entry-level courses, as witnessed by the high failure rates in these courses and the high dropout rate among freshman students.

Finally, the student-teacher relationship is much different in college than in high school. A common example cited by college faculty is the first-term freshman who is failing a course and approaches the professor near the end of the term to request extra credit in order to be able to pass the course. College instructors are often perplexed by such requests, students are equally baffled by the instructor's reaction, since their high school teachers were usually amenable to such an arrangement. In other words, the cultural and social expectations about learning and performance that students encounter tend to vastly differ as well.

In short, the nature of expectations in high school and in college are significantly different. Students must be prepared to draw upon a different array of learning strategies and coping skills to be successful in college than those they developed and honed in high school. Current measures of college readiness do not necessarily do a good job of capturing these multifaceted dimensions of readiness.

Based on this assessment of the nature of college, an important question to ask is: How well do current measures gauge student readiness along these and other related important dimensions necessary for college success? The next section describes current means of determining college readiness and some of

the limitations of those approaches. This is followed by a section that provides a more comprehensive notion of what it means to be college ready and then details each of its dimensions. Next, this paper presents some ways in which these dimensions might be measured and identifies how a more integrated approach to measuring college readiness might benefit students. Finally, this paper considers the changes required of high schools, colleges, and students for this new approach to be put into practice.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a full critique of current conceptions and constructions of college readiness, it is worthwhile to consider briefly some of the limitations of current key measures, most notably among them course titles, grade point averages, and tests, as well as a related measure: performance in entry-level general-education courses. This brief overview is presented to accentuate the need for a more robust, comprehensive definition of college readiness, one that leads to new tools, methods, and indices that will help students understand their relative level of preparedness for college and will help high schools make systematic changes to increase the college readiness of students. The major measures and their limitations are discussed in turn.

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