Increasing the number of young people who attain postsecondary credentials has become one of today’s primary educational objectives. Low college completion rates are typically linked to students’ lack of academic preparation, prompting states to implement the Common Core State Standards and other academically focused reforms. Yet research suggests that even many students who arrive at college academically well-prepared do not go on to earn a college credential.

College success depends on a host of important skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are generally omitted from state standards and other reform efforts. A recent study (consisting of interviews with 170 community college faculty, staff, and students about the non-academic behaviors and skills exhibited by successful college students) that we carried out with others at the Community College Research Center suggests that policymakers and local educators should consider a more expansive definition of college readiness—one that includes specific college-ready behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge in addition to the academic standards found in the Common Core. This more holistic definition should be integrated into state standards and curricular decisions in order to improve college outcomes for greater numbers of graduating high school students.

Currently, there is a lack of clarity about what “being a successful college student” entails. Our research indicates that college instructors and administrators have clear expectations about the behaviors, attitudes, and skills college students need to succeed. These expectations are different from those students face in high school, yet they usually remain unspoken. This lack of transparency is unfair to students—particularly those who are the first in their family to attend college and do not know the “unwritten rules” of college success—and it is detrimental to the nation’s goal of increasing postsecondary attainment. New college students must learn to “play the part” of a college student, which means they need to learn the appropriate behaviors and skills that make up that role. This learning can and should begin in secondary school, as part of the nation’s broader college-readiness agenda.

Findings

We found two important differences between the role of a college student and that of a high school student. First, college students are expected to be self-aware, meaning they must be able to independently and critically examine and reflect on their personal strengths and weaknesses, and develop a plan to address those weaknesses. Second, there are multiple ways to enact the role of college student, making it more fluid than the role of a high school student. Though there are clear standards to which students are held, how college students reach a point of mastery is left to them to a far greater extent than for high school students.

We also found four specific areas of knowledge and behavior that college students must demonstrate. We call these the four components of the role. Mastery of each component is signified by specific attitudes and behaviors, and includes a variety of strategies students can use to meet expectations.

★ Academic habits. To be successful, college students need to relearn how to “do” school. The collegiate role requires substan-
tially different academic habits than those expected of high school students—college students must be more independent and reflective, and must take initiative for their own learning. Take studying, for example. College instructors often tell students they must “study hard” for their class. But in high school, studying usually entails completing nightly homework, taking biweekly tests, and completing short-term assignments. College studying, in contrast, means completing work independently. It means reviewing a syllabus at the beginning of a course, developing a plan to complete long-term projects, and learning large amounts of material for infrequent exams.

★ Cultural know-how. Colleges have their own cultures and norms; effective students understand and adhere to these norms. For instance, in our interviews, staff and faculty said that successful college students “respect” their instructors and classmates. When we dug into what this really meant, we found that instructors interpreted certain behaviors—such as dressing professionally, communicating about absences, and using formal language when writing and speaking—as indicative of respect, commitment, and the desire to earn a college degree. Unlike high school, where students often can pass even without exhibiting these behaviors, college students who do not adhere to college norms often provoke a negative response from instructors, which may contribute to students’ choice not to return the next semester.

★ Balancing multiple roles and time demands. Many college students have other important obligations, such as working or parenting. These additional roles compete for their time and energy in ways they do not for most high school students, and the stresses of these roles can conflict with the demands of college. Being successful in college therefore requires individuals to find ways to make college a priority. For instance, students might opt to study or visit a tutoring center between classes instead of socializing, freeing up off-campus time for the demands of other roles. Effective students also study in ways and at times that best meet their needs and obligations. As one student described her personal studying strategy, “I stay [on campus] more often than I go home; that way I don’t have the distractions to do the stuff so I can succeed.”

★ Help-seeking. The final component of the college student role is engagement in proactive and self-directed help-seeking. Unlike in secondary school, instructors do not typically approach students to offer additional assistance. Instead, the college offers services that students need to find and use on their own. Before they can ask for help, however, college students must recognize that they need assistance. Students must self-diagnose their needs and be able to identify which campus resources are most appropriate to meet these needs. Finally, once college students have identified both a problem and resources that might assist them in solving it, they are expected to take the initiative to seek out that help. Again, this is in stark contrast to high school, where teachers frequently lead students directly to a given service.

Recommendations

Successful students learn to meet the expectations of being a college student by developing strategies to meet those expectations. For example, students might revise their academic habits to break their syllabus into small chunks of material to learn at regularly scheduled intervals, rather than study everything right before a test. These strategies can and should be taught in high school as part of a broader set of college readiness skills. (Our report—which is available at http://crc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1126—provides a list of specific things incoming high school students should learn about and practice in order to be ready for the college student role.)

Much of this type of teaching and learning must take place at the classroom level. For example, high school (and college) teachers should explain to students, in explicit and actionable terms, how the college student role is different from the high school role. But policymakers have responsibility, as well. To move toward a holistic definition of college readiness, we suggest:

• Including college-student expectations and strategies in state standards. This would make it clear to instructors that college readiness is more than just students’ ability to do rigorous academic work.

• Charge P-16 councils and other cross-sector agencies with identifying and delineating the non-academic skills expected by college instructors in their state. Only when these expectations are clearly defined can they be expressed to incoming college students.

• Incorporate non-academic skills into other state readiness initiatives, such as senior-year transition courses, college-high school partnerships, and Common Core implementation activities. Doing so will communicate these expectations to students and give the opportunity to practice meeting them.

The Common Core has spurred an unprecedented national conversation about what schools should be teaching young people. These standards are changing the way core content area subjects are taught, but if we truly want our students to succeed in college and the workplace we also need to teach them a broader range of skills. States need to take the bold action to mandate that high schools teach their students how to become college students. Until students are told the concrete ways that college and high school are different and until they are provided strategies for meeting new expectations, there is a danger that all the focus on academic readiness will not lead to real change in students’ postsecondary achievement.