

The Missing Factors for College Readiness and Successful College Completion

By Raymond Gerson and Carolyn Mendiola

Abstract

The State Board of Education (SBOE) approved a comprehensive innovative college and career readiness course that can be offered for credit to high school students in Texas. This course teaches skills, learning strategies, attitudes and behaviors that are often missing from other high school courses and which are needed to enhance college readiness, transition and successful college completion. An example of a Texas high school which created a successful model of this course is presented. At the school, 108 out of 125 of its 9th grade students met the college reading standard on the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) and 92 met the writing standard.

In the United States, nearly 60 percent of first year college students must take remedial or developmental courses (Shulock, 2010), and lack of readiness for college is a major reason why many students who begin with remedial courses do not complete college. On average, more than 75 percent of students required to take remedial classes never graduate (Shulock, 2010). Students must pay tuition to take remedial courses and do not earn college credit. Many students do not complete remedial courses because the courses can feel like a waste of time and money for students interested in inexpensive and fast paths to a degree (Boyington 2015).

College enrollment rates have increased, but completion rates are low. The National Student Clearinghouse tracked 2.4 million first-time college students who enrolled in 2007 with the goal to pursue a degree or certificate. Only 56 percent earned a degree within six years (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Yuan and Harrell, 2007).

Most educators agree that preparation for college is important. More students need to at least complete post-secondary certificate programs, associate degrees or bachelor's degrees to get good jobs in the 21st century job market. As educators, we must and we can prepare more students to become college-ready and to succeed in college. Educational leaders acknowledge the importance of teaching cognitive skills and good academic content. They also recognize the value of teaching higher-level thinking skills such as critical and creative thinking. However, other important skills also can enhance academic success.

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Carolyn Mendiola has 20 years experience as an educator. She taught high school ELA, was a district level coordinator and a high school assistant principal, and is currently principal of Sharyland High School. She opened the first Early College High School in Sharyland ISD.

Missing Factors

Other skills and factors which need to be taught are missing from most high school courses. These are non-cognitive factors that interact with cognitive skills for effective learning. Non-cognitive factors include learning strategies, study skills, attendance, work habits, time management, goal setting, self-regulatory skills, help-seeking behaviors, metacognitive strategies, problem-solving skills, academic perseverance and positive academic mindset. The University of Chicago Consortium of School Research reviewed hundreds of research studies that showed strong correlations between these non-cognitive factors and academic success (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson and Beechum, 2012). Over four decades of research on academic mindset alone found the beliefs students have about themselves as learners influence their performance in school (Dweck, 2000).

According to Dweck, students with a "growth mindset" are more likely to succeed, while students with a "fixed mindset" are more likely to do poorly. Students with a growth mindset believe they can increase their intelligence through effort; students with a fixed mindset believe their intelligence is fixed and cannot be increased through effort. The good news is that a growth mindset and many other non-cognitive factors can be taught.

Predictor of College Success

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In one study, researchers followed over 200,000 college students for years to find out which students would complete their college education (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009). Good grades in high school were a three to five times better predictor of college success and completion than SAT and ACT scores. According to this study, good grades reflect many important student attributes and non-cognitive factors that have been mentioned in this paper.

In another study, 1,000 GED holders who had dropped out of high school were compared to a similar number of high school graduates (Heckmann, Humphries and Mader, 2010). Significantly more of the high school graduates completed college and earned more income than the GED holders. Both groups had equivalent cognitive skills. The difference, according to this study, was that those who persisted and completed high school had stronger non-cognitive skills.

High School Course for College and Career Readiness

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An innovative course approved by the Texas SBOE teaches students cognitive skills and many of the non-cognitive factors which have been mentioned. This course is called “College Transition” PEIMS #N1290050, and it was approved for 10th-12th grade students in Texas high schools. Some Early College High Schools and other high schools have received permission to also offer the course to ninth grade students. This course is an elective and can be offered as a one semester course for .5 credit or as a two semester course for 1 credit.

College Transition was designed to equip students with knowledge and skills for successful performance in both high school and college. Students learn research-based strategies for academic success such as time management, goal setting, note taking, reading strategies, problem-solving skills, how to conduct research and more. This course also teaches students how to research scholarships and grants, complete college applications and explore requirements of different colleges and universities. The course also has a strong career readiness and exploration component. Any textbooks and materials that meet the essential knowledge and skills can be used to teach the course.

College Transition can be taught as a high school class by anyone with a valid Texas teacher certification. When taught as a college course, the instructor must have a master’s degree with 18 graduate hours in either psychology or education.

Example of Teaching a Non-cognitive Skill

Knowing how to set and achieve goals is an important skill and is taught as part of the College Transition course. Students learn how to:

1. Understand the difference between a wish and a goal
2. Break the goal into a series of small steps
3. Develop an action plan
4. Make the goal specific and measurable
5. Work toward deadlines
6. Anticipate and overcome obstacles

Student Example:

A ninth grade student was struggling in her biology class and did not think of herself as a good student. She set a goal to pass her next biology class. She identified several steps to take, such as setting aside three hours a week of study time, two hours a week of tutoring and asking her teacher questions about anything that was unclear. When she received her test score, she had made the only 100 in the class.

She said that this one simple goal activity changed her mindset and perception of herself as a student. She realized that if she sets goals, breaks them into manageable steps and puts in the work, she is capable of being an excellent student. This is an example of how one simple non-cognitive skill can significantly improve academic performance and be life changing for a student.

Example of a Successful Model of College Transition

In fall 2014 and spring 2015, Sharyland Advanced Academy taught College Transition PEIMS #N1290050 to all of its ninth grade students. This was a new Early College High School (ECHS) in Mission in the Rio Grande Valley that just opened in fall 2014.

Carolyn Mendiola was the high school principal at Sharyland Advanced Academy in fall 2014, and she implemented the College Transition course. She is now the principal of Sharyland High School.

Textbooks used in the course were “Achieve College Success: Learn how in 20 Hours or Less” and “Achieve Career Success: Discover and Get the Job You Want,” both by Raymond Gerson and “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens” and “The 6 Most Important Decisions You’ll Ever Make: A Guide for Teens,” both by Sean Covey. Pamela Reyes Buentello, a teacher at Sharyland Advanced Academy, used the textbooks and accompanying instructor materials to develop the curriculum. In addition to the textbooks, Mendiola and Buentello created extra reading and writing prep materials to be used in the course. Mendiola set high expectations for the faculty and students which helped to develop positive mindsets. She chose excellent teachers who were passionate about teaching the course.

A May 8, 2015, report on the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) results for the ninth grade students who took the College Transition course showed that 86 percent, or 108 out of 125 of the students, met the TSI standard for reading, and 73 percent, or 92 out of 108, met the TSI standard for writing. This contrasts sharply with the results in math, which was not taught as part of the College Transition course: 19 out of 125 passed. These students at Sharyland Advanced Academy can begin taking a wide variety of dual credit courses based on their reading and writing scores.

Why the Need for the College Transition Course

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During the spring 2014, I started planning the course load for my incoming freshmen at the Advanced Academic Academy. I knew how critical it would be to create a college-like atmosphere from day one with an emphasis on TSI preparation, resume building, college exploration, leadership skills and other activities aligned to college preparatory. My counselor and I also visited the class frequently

to discuss GPAs, college entrance requirements, portfolio requirements, etc.

Aside from the pressure of House Bill 5, which requires every child to be college ready, and the new state accountability system, which focused on postsecondary readiness, I knew I did not want to do a disservice to my students by not adequately preparing them to enroll in the first dual enrollment college course as freshmen. That said, I began planning for the course and inserted a 50-minute, year-long College Transition (CT) course into our 90-minute accelerated block schedule and required that every freshman take the course during this period. Students would not be allowed to substitute College Transition for any other elective. Four teachers, out of a staff of five, would teach the course, while my fifth teacher would run the TSI lab and rotate each CT class in once a week.

As every educator knows, without a “guaranteed and viable curriculum,” as Dr. Robert Marzano states, you cannot expect alignment between instruction and assessment (Marzano 2003). Knowing this, I asked one teacher to work over the summer, with compensation of course, to develop the CT curriculum based on my vision of what the course would entail. We utilized various resources, but our main resource was “Achieve College Success” by Raymond Gerson. This resource provided everything the teacher needed to focus on for college preparatory, including lesson plans, PowerPoints, and assessments. Additionally, we had other resources that focused on TSI preparation, and, as mentioned previously, we rotated students into the TSI lab once a week during their CT class to prepare for the college readiness exam.

The course work and the structure of the course proved to be successful. We had 54 percent of our freshmen pass the Reading TSI on their first attempt. Students were excited, encouraged and motivated once they got a taste of success. They looked forward to the course and, during the second semester, they received instruction on career preparation using Raymond Gerson’s “Achieve Career Success.” At the end of the spring semester, 86 percent of the students were eligible to start taking dual credit courses.

As principal of a comprehensive high school, I will be implementing a College Transition course for all 10th grade students (HB 5 group) in fall 2015 and hope to have the same success rate, if not better, with my sophomore students.

Conclusion

Significantly increasing college completion rates will require a shift from focusing on standardized test scores to emphasizing the teaching of cognitive plus non-cognitive factors that help students earn good grades in high school (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson and Beechum). Texas has an approved innovative “College Transition” course for teaching these non-cognitive factors. High school principals who want to offer students the opportunity to take the College Transition or similar courses can evaluate models such as the one at Sharyland Advanced Academy which has already demonstrated excellent results.

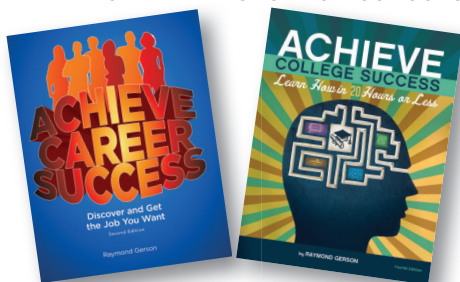
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