Many students who are eligible for college are not ready for college. Readiness is much more complex and multidimensional than eligibility. Students become eligible for college by completing high school courses that have prescribed titles, taking necessary admissions tests, and submitting application and financial aid materials. Becoming ready to succeed in and complete college, however, demands that administrators, teachers, and staff members pay attention to a number of important attributes and characteristics beyond what’s required to be accepted.

Over the past 15 years, I have conducted research on entry-level college courses that has led me to create a conceptual framework for thinking about college and career readiness in a more comprehensive fashion. My colleagues and I at the Educational Policy Improvement Center used this conceptual model to create a practical way to diagnose a school’s current capacity to get kids ready for postsecondary education and prescribe programs and initiatives that are consistent with the school’s culture, capabilities, and needs.

**The Four Dimensions**

Readiness includes four major components: development of key cognitive strategies, mastery of key content knowledge, proficiency with a set of academic behaviors, and sufficient “college knowledge” about what postsecondary education requires.

**Key cognitive strategies.** To succeed in college or the workplace, students must know how to think about and apply key content knowledge. For example, they must know how to identify a problem; collect information and evaluate the credibility and relevance of the sources they used; interpret, analyze, and evaluate the information.
Most high schools are organized to make students eligible for college admission, not make them ready to succeed in entry-level college courses.

Getting as many students as possible ready for college and careers requires secondary schools to pay attention to four dimensions of college readiness.

A diagnostic tool can help schools determine how well they are preparing their students to succeed after they graduate.

they gathered to determine how well it contributes to the explanation or solution of the problem; and communicate their research by organizing it into a usable format and constructing a logical means to present it. Completing those tasks with precision and accuracy requires that students learn how to look for errors and confirm the accuracy of everything presented or stated.

**Key content knowledge.** Schools must teach students the big ideas of the academic disciplines in a structure that helps students understand and retain this information. Students do not need to know everything before they go to college—they will study key content knowledge in greater depth in entry-level college courses—but they do need to master a strong set of foundational skills and concepts in the core academic disciplines before they get there.

**Academic behaviors.** To do well in any type of postsecondary learning environment, students must master a range of self-management skills that include goal setting; awareness of their own academic strengths and weaknesses; persistence with challenging academic tasks; and study skills, including working in collaborative groups. Those behaviors are to some degree measures of maturity, but they can and must be developed systematically throughout secondary school to be in place by the time students get to college.

**College knowledge.** College is different from high school, and students must be aware of how it is different and be prepared to pay attention to numerous details and make many decisions to select, apply to, receive financial aid for, and be accepted by a postsecondary institution. In short, knowing what to do to get to college is “privileged knowledge” that is held by those who have easy access to college by their position in society but that is hidden from those who would be the first in a family to attend a postsecondary program. Schools must make this information explicitly available to all students, particularly to those whose only exposure to it will be in school.

**Increasing College Readiness**

I developed the following seven recommendations on the basis of a study of 38 high schools that consistently get more students ready for college than would be predicted.

**Principle 1: Create and maintain a college-going culture in the school.** Administrators and teachers must be ready to make college readiness a key schoolwide goal. Through many activities, both symbolic and substantive, educators can signal to students that the school prepares students for postsecondary success, not just admission into college. This starts with setting expectations for all students to be college ready and then encouraging all students to set a goal of going on to some form of postsecondary education.
Principle 2: Create a core academic program that is aligned with and leads to college readiness by the end of 12th grade. Although it may be challenging to do so, the school must define a core academic program that leads to college readiness for all students. All courses should contribute to developing student readiness in one or more of the four dimensions of college readiness. Key to achieving this goal is a commitment to review and revise syllabi to ensure course alignment with college readiness standards. After schools have developed quality syllabi that address the four dimensions of college readiness and put them in place, they can focus their instructional programs on developing key cognitive strategies, teaching key content, mastering academic behaviors, and giving all students access to college knowledge.

Principle 3: Teach key self-management skills and expect students to use them. Students need help learning to manage their own learning. Students should be encouraged or required to set goals and gauge completion of them. Three types of goals are useful: immediate goals for course work, short- to medium-term ones for individual classes and for high school, and long-term goals for postsecondary plans and life aspirations. To help with time management, schools can provide students with tools for managing assignments and due dates. Faculty members must agree on and teach common methods to take notes. Finally, all students should be taught how to participate in study groups and receive opportunities to do so each academic term.

Principle 4: Make college real by preparing students for the complexity of applying to college and making the transition successfully. Students must work more independently in college than they did in middle level and high school. To help them prepare to do so, expect students to complete some homework without submitting it for points or a grade. Give complex assignments that require independent work, teamwork, or study groups to complete successfully. Be cautious about granting extra credit, limiting it to additional academic opportunities, not substitute activities. Develop assignments that infuse college-type expectations into courses, require lots of writing in all courses, employ more stringent grading criteria, build student persistence by giving challenging assignments, and encourage students to take individual initiative.

Principle 5: Create assignments and grading policies in high school that more closely approximate college expectations. Students must work more independently in college than they did in middle level and high school. To help them prepare to do so, expect students to complete some homework without submitting it for points or a grade. Give complex assignments that require independent work, teamwork, or study groups to complete successfully. Be cautious about granting extra credit, limiting it to additional academic opportunities, not substitute activities. Develop assignments that infuse college-type expectations into courses, require lots of writing in all courses, employ more stringent grading criteria, build student persistence by giving challenging assignments, and encourage students to take individual initiative.

Principle 6: Make the senior year meaningful and challenging. Many students are substantially underchallenged during their senior year, which has serious repercussions when they enter college. High schools can ensure that all seniors have a full, academically challenging schedule that includes math, nonfiction reading materials, and extensive writing. All students should be encouraged or expected to have collegelike experiences, such as college campus visits, dual enrollment opportunities, AP courses, senior seminars, and challenging senior projects. Students can benefit from taking a college placement test early in their senior year to determine whether they would end up in a remedial course while they still have time to do something about it.

Principle 7: Build partnerships with and connections to postsecondary programs and institutions. Generally, high schools and colleges operate in very disconnected spheres, even when they are close geographically. Partnerships are important to helping students transition successfully. High school and postsecondary faculty and staff members can begin by forming personal connections to accomplish a common task, such as discussing student writing. Once relationships are established, they can form partnerships to coordinate and align their expectations and teaching strategies and take advantage of physical proxim-
ity by offering dual enrollment opportunities. To gauge the effects of the partnership activities, high schools must collect data on how well their graduates perform in college.

**Assessing Readiness**

It is difficult for a school to figure out how well it is doing on the four dimensions and seven principles, but until it can, the proportion of students who are college ready is unlikely to rise substantially. Although it is possible to increase the number of students who are college eligible by getting more students into courses with the right title, this alone does not necessarily ensure that those students will be ready for or successful in college. The goal of increased readiness requires a much more penetrating look at what is going on within the school along the four dimensions of readiness.

To facilitate this process, my colleagues and I have developed a process called the CollegeCareer-Ready School Diagnostic. This process generates a detailed profile that addresses each of the four dimensions and that results in recommendations for action. The school diagnostic collects key statistical data on student performance in a variety of areas along with self-reports from students, teachers, counselors, and administrators on all four of the readiness dimensions. In combination, these two information sources paint a comprehensive picture of the state of college readiness in the school.

**Key cognitive strategies.** How well do students formulate problems, identify and collect information necessary to solve problems, interpret findings in ways that help them resolve the problem they have identified, communicate their conclusions in a rational and clear fashion, and do all of this with precision and accuracy?

**Key content knowledge.** To what do students attribute their success or difficulties in core academic areas? Do they believe that effort is more important than aptitude, or do they refuse to try hard in areas where they believe they are not already naturally talented? To what degree do they value what they are learning in the core academic areas? Do they believe that the content they are learning is sufficiently challenging and that they are being challenged personally to achieve? Are they developing a deeper understanding of the structure of knowledge in key academic areas?

**Academic behaviors.** Can students manage their time well? Can they set goals for themselves and know how to achieve them? Do they have a general awareness of their academic strengths and weaknesses and a desire to improve in particular areas? Do they know how to take notes effectively? Can they study for tests efficiently? Do they know how to form and utilize study groups of their peers?

**College knowledge.** Are students aware of the options that are available to them in postsecondary education? Do they know how to select a college or a technical program and what they need to do to be eligible and prepared to succeed in it? Do they understand financial aid requirements and deadlines for taking admissions tests and submitting applications? Do they have some general idea of how the culture of college is different from high school; how to relate to a professor or students from different backgrounds and viewpoints; and how to use support services, such as advisers and special programs?

**Findings From Schools**

The diagnostic process has yielded some interesting findings at participating high schools. For example, the simple act of administering the instrument has a strong effect. Some teachers will resolve to make changes on the basis of the questions themselves, which point them in the direction of very specific actions they can take. Students receive a brief profile after completing the instrument, which prompts many to consider more seriously their post–high school aspirations and what they are doing to achieve their goals.

When students are polled on their post–high school plans, some interesting patterns can emerge. In ninth grade, students across socioeconomic groups have the goal of attending college about equally, but aspirations diminish each year for students from low-income backgrounds. Those students lower their sights from four-year to two-year institutions and then increasingly select work after high school as a goal. This indicates a process of discouragement taking place as they progress through high school.

We have also found that students may be
overestimating their capabilities in relation to the key cognitive strategies. We suspect this is because they really have very little experience engaging in this type of learning, and as a result, they assume they are more competent than they are.

As a general rule, administrators assume that many more students are receiving information about college entrance requirements, financial aid, and such things as admissions tests deadlines than are actually hearing about such things. Administrators also tend to have an overall rosier view of the state of the school than do teachers and students.

Responding to the Challenge
Getting all students ready for learning in postsecondary environments is particularly challenging in many schools where a commonly held belief system is that only certain groups of students are “college material.” My recommendations and suggestions can help schools take concrete steps to change their programs and practices so that more students leave high school ready to succeed in college and careers. PL

David T. Conley (david_conley@epiconline.org) is a professor at the University of Oregon in Eugene, the director of the university’s Center for Educational Policy Research, and the CEO of the Educational Policy Improvement Center in Eugene, OR. He is the author of College and Career: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School (2010, Jossey-Bass).

Author’s note: For more information about the four dimensions and related publications available at no cost, visit www.collegecareerready.org.

Free Resource
Principal Leadership readers have free access to a mini version of the school diagnostic to assess their schools’ four dimensions of college and career readiness. Completing the diagnostic will generate a brief and actionable report that summarizes where your school falls in terms of postsecondary student preparation and identifies specific practices that your school can implement to increase college and career readiness. To access the free tool and get more information about the full school diagnostic, go to www.collegecareerready.org.