

What Does "Postsecondary Readiness" Really Mean When There Are Multiple Pathways to Success?

Despite a lot of recent attention to "postsecondary readiness," there is little consensus on what the term means. Numerous national and state organizations have developed definitions, with key commonalities and differences among them. The growing interest in postsecondary readiness reflects a common concern about how well students are prepared for education and employment beyond high school. But the multiple definitions often reflect substantive differences in interpretation, purpose, and use. And when definitions are used to guide policy or priorities, such differences can be significant.

Postsecondary readiness may refer broadly to preparing students for the transition from high school to multiple pathways after graduation (i.e., college or work), or more specifically to being ready for college. The demands of college can be further defined in terms of study skills and work habits, or particular content knowledge, leading some organizations to distinguish between academic preparedness for college entry and overall readiness for college success. In addition, some definitions encompass workforce preparation, while others focus on "21st century skills."

Not only do the definitions vary, how they are used varies as well. Some states use readiness definitions to shape their K-12 standards and assessments. Districts and schools may consider postsecondary readiness in decisions about curricula, instruction, and support services. Readiness definitions may help guide colleges and employers as they select assessments and other tools to gauge students' need for remedial support or eligibility for employment.

Given this diversity of meaning and intent, how can policymakers and educators make sense of the options and choose which postsecondary readiness definition is best for their particular purpose and context? What are the implications of choosing one definition over another?

Stanley Rabinowitz, Director of WestEd's Assessment & Standards Development Services (ASDS), emphasizes that there is no single "best" or universal definition of postsecondary readiness that everyone should use. Instead, policymakers and educators need to look carefully at the differences among definitions and what they emphasize or downplay.

Rabinowitz recommends that users look at information about both "external validation" and the "internal structures" of different definitions by considering their sources, content, organization, and level of detail. Key questions to ask are:

- How has the definition been validated by others?
- What kind of content does it address?

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- How is the content organized?
- How specific is the definition?
- How does the definition address similarities and differences across multiple pathways?
- How has the definition been validated by others?

Nearly all developers of postsecondary readiness definitions cite a research base underlying their efforts, though the nature of that base varies. Developers may rely on syntheses of others' research to guide their decisions about what is important for postsecondary success. And, to supplement what is known or believed, some developers carry out their own research, such as analyzing high school or college coursework and expectations, surveying college professors and employers, and performing task analyses of entry-level jobs across a range of industries. Says Rabinowitz, "The key step here is to identify or develop appropriate indicators of success against which the definitions can be validated."

When considering the sources of external validity, Rabinowitz says it is important to take into account their varying nature, such as how extensive the research base is and whether the research can be expected to generalize across settings and pathways. Ideally, he adds, policymakers should "triangulate" across multiple sources of credible information to examine the strength and comprehensiveness of the evidence for a given definition.

What Kind of Content Does It Address?

Different definitions of postsecondary readiness emphasize different types of content. A 2008 report by ASDS for the state of Colorado describes a continuum that can be divided into three categories:

- definitions that emphasize core academic knowledge and skills,
- those that integrate core academics with applied skills (also called "thinking skills"), and
- definitions with an emphasis just on applied skills

Each emphasis has benefits and potential drawbacks. According to Rabinowitz, it is best to think of a blending of core academic content and "thinking/problem skills" in order to maximize students' ability to make cross-subject connections and develop applied skills.

How Is the Content Organized?

Definitions of postsecondary readiness can also be grouped into another set of three categories based on how the content of the definition is "articulated" or organized:

- by cross-grade knowledge and skills,
- by knowledge and skills to be acquired by the end
- of high school, or
- by knowledge and skills tied to specific levels leading up to high school graduation.



Again, Rabinowitz points out that there are pros and cons to each emphasis, and these differences have implications for how the definitions are best used. Cross-grade definitions tend to work best for broad "guiding principles or overarching goals," notes Rabinowitz, and can provide a "common language" for policymakers and administrators to use. But such definitions may not be as useful for refining standards or setting specific achievement benchmarks. States pursuing these purposes may be better off choosing from definitions that articulate knowledge and skills needed at the end of high school or at specified levels leading up to graduation. This clear articulation of content can contribute to a common set of goals and expectations for student learning.

How Specific Is the Definition?

Similarly, the "granularity" of definitions also varies from one to another, ranging from broad to specific. Some definitions address readiness at a very general level, identifying broad-stroke themes that constitute readiness for postsecondary education or employment. Such definitions can be useful for communicating a state's high-level goals for students and can thereby help guide some policy and program decisions.

Broad-stroke definitions are not as useful for more detailed decisions. A readiness definition that spells out more specific knowledge and/or skills may be more useful to refine K-12 standards and ensure the standards are measurable, for example, or to develop an end-of-course or admission exam.

According to Rabinowitz, the best approach may be to develop broad-stroke, brief definitions for communicating big ideas, supplemented by more specific statements of key knowledge and skills.

How Does the Definition Address Similarities and Differences Across Multiple Pathways?

An ongoing debate is whether one readiness definition can cover all possible postsecondary pathways (e.g., select four-year college, non-competitive four-year college, two-year college, math/science-focused industry such as engineering, customer-focused industry such as marketing and hospitality). "The research is mixed at this point," says Rabinowitz. "States may wish to develop a core that cuts across all sectors and allow the pathways to supplement that core with additional skills specific to its needs."

Rabinowitz and ASDS colleagues at WestEd apply the above questions when helping policymakers and administrators, district leaders, and other educators sort out different definitions of postsecondary readiness and select the elements most useful to their purposes. In 2008, for example, as part of the Colorado Department of Education's comprehensive revision of the state's model content standards, ASDS produced the 2008 report mentioned previously that categorizes, organizes, and analyzes major definitions of 21st century skills, college readiness, and career/postsecondary readiness.

The report covers a dozen such definitions, including College Readiness Standards and Benchmarks developed by ACT, recommendations of The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, a Framework for 21st Century Learning, the College Board Standards for College Success, and a definition from Achieve's American Diploma Project.



In September 2009, Rabinowitz was selected to serve on a national panel of experts for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. For his role on this committee, he notes that "the research and support we've provided for states and organizations over the past several years are proving invaluable." The panel is charged with reviewing and validating both the Common Core's development process and its resulting college- and career-readiness standards that will have broad implications nationally.