WHAT IS "CAREER READY"?



National dialogue has escalated around the concepts of college and career readiness. Influential national and state policymakers have called for high schools to prepare students to be ready for both college and a career. But what do these terms really mean?

All too often, the terms "career ready" and "college ready" are used interchangeably, and discussions around career readiness are limited to traditional academic skills that allow students to successfully enroll in postsecondary education. While there is no debate that a rigorous level of academic proficiency, especially in math and literacy, is essential for any post-high school endeavor, the reality is that it takes much more to be truly considered ready for a career.

Career readiness involves three major skill areas: *core academic skills* and the ability to apply those skills to concrete situations in order to function in the workplace and in routine daily activities; *employability skills* (such as critical thinking and responsibility) that are essential in any career area; and *technical, job-specific skills* related to a specific career pathway. These skills have been emphasized across numerous pieces of research and allow students to enter true career pathways that offer family-sustaining wages and opportunities for advancement.

ACADEMIC SKILLS

As has been documented by such organizations as ACT and Achieve, career-ready core academics and college-ready core academics are essentially the same, thus creating overlap in the preparation students need to be ready for postsecondary education and careers.[1] All students need foundational academic knowledge, especially in math and English language arts, and, in today's economic environment, all high school students need the academic skills necessary to pursue postsecondary education without remediation—the measure many consider "college readiness."

However, to truly be career-ready, students also need to be able to apply academics in context, and some academic skills need more attention and development. For example, employers often cite deficiencies in English and written communications, such as memos, letters and complex technical reports. This supports the idea that most of the written material students will encounter in their careers is informational in nature, such as technical manuals and research articles, and they must be equipped academically to analyze and use these materials. Too often, these skills are not emphasized in traditional academic classrooms. Workplace deficiencies in math are also commonly noted, with more attention needed on areas such as data analysis and statistics, reasoning, and solving mathematical problems.[2]

Students must also be able to apply academic knowledge to authentic situations they may face in their careers, a skill that takes practice and intentional instruction that may need to be tailored to a student's specific career goals. For example, students preparing to be nurses need to be able to calculate and apply ratios, proportions, rates and percentages to determine drug dosages,[3] while construction students need to be able to apply geometrical principles to design and implement building plans.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Employability skills have often been cited by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. These skills include (but are not limited to) critical thinking, adaptabil-

ity, problem solving, oral and written communications, collaboration and teamwork, creativity, responsibility, professionalism, ethics, and technology use. Numerous groups have worked with business and industry leaders to identify employability skills critical to employee success, including the 1990 U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills that produced the report "What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000," and, more recently, such groups as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

The report "Critical Skills Needs and Resources for the Changing Workforce,"[4] by SHRM, stated that, "Overall, employers placed the greatest weight on employee adaptability and critical thinking skills. HR (human resource) professionals and employees both reported that adaptability/flexibility and critical thinking/problem-solving skills were of greatest importance now compared with two years ago."

In the 2006 report, "Are They Really Ready to Work?,"[5] employability skills "dominate rankings of knowledge and skills expected to increase in importance over the next five years." Employers identified critical thinking/problem solving, information-technology application, teamwork/collaboration, creativity/innovation and diversity as the top five such skills.

Students must be provided opportunities to gain these skills and to learn to apply them to real-world life and work situations. Many of these employability skills are also necessary for "college readiness," creating some additional overlap between the two areas.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

In order to actually be considered ready to enter a career, an individual must also possess at least some level of job-specific knowledge and skills. In the National Association of Manufacturers 2005 Skills Gap Report, "technical skills" was the top response to the question, "What types of skills will employees need more of over the next three years?"[6] While many career opportunities include a strong element of on-the-job training, some of these technical or industry-based skills must be acquired in advance. For example, technical skills are required for licensure in many professions, such as in most health care fields, or for broader industry certifications, such as the American Welding Society's Certified Welder credential.

Through the States Career Clusters Initiative[7], business and industry leaders have identified key knowledge and skill statements across 16 career clusters and 79 more-specific pathways. These statements represent what students need to know and be able to do to be successful in the specified career area. While some of the statements cover the academic and employability-related areas discussed above, there are also key technical skills highlighted. The cluster-level skill statements are very broad, providing students with a foundation of knowledge that could be applied in numerous related careers. More specific pathway-level skills begin to hone students' abilities in a more defined career area.

CONCLUSION

Since most of the career opportunities for today's students will require some form of postsecondary education, there are many times when students will not be able to acquire the necessary academic, technical or employability skills in high school that will allow them to be career-ready without further education and training. Additional knowledge and specialization in one or more of these areas is often required either immediately after high school or in the future, depending on a student's career choices.

However, regardless of a student's path, it takes all three of these broad skill sets for students to be ready for a career. Twenty-first century high schools should focus on providing all students a strong foundation across all three areas so they are prepared for whatever their lives may bring.

ENDNOTES

1 Achieve, Inc., "What is College- and Career-Ready?," **www.achieve.org/files/CollegeandCareerReady.pdf**.

2 Olsen, Lynn, "What Does 'Ready' Mean?," *Education Week*, **www.educationalliance.org/StateScholars/Downloads/WhatDoesReadyMean.pdf**.

3 Olsen, Lynn, "What Does 'Ready' Mean?"

4 Society for Human Resource Management, "Critical Skills Needs and Resources for the Changing Workforce: Keeping Skills Competitive," **www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Pages/CriticalSkillsNeeds.aspx**.

5 The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, "Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce," **www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf**.

6 National Association of Manufacturers, "2005 Skills Gap Report – A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce," **www.nam.org/~/media/Files/s_nam/docs/235800/235731.pdf.ashx**.

7 States Career Clusters Initiative, **www.careerclusters.org**.