



## College-Readiness Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

Wally Barnes and John R. Slate  
Sam Houston State University

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical analysis of the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda that now guides curriculum and expectations in our nation's secondary schools. Although President Obama, in 2010, emphasized the need for college- and career-readiness for all high school graduates, the emphasis is clearly on college-readiness, at the exclusion of other educational alternatives. College- and career-readiness may be the mantra for the 21st century, but politicians and educational leaders tend to lean heavily on college-readiness when curricular requirements are increased and accountability measures become more stringent, which tends to anchor academic-preparedness. In this article, educational policy reports, legislative acts, and scholarly journal articles were examined and discussed to illuminate the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda and explore the extent to which students should be college-ready. In the review of recent college- and career-readiness literature, the indication is that, in all likelihood, the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is a dichotomous variable rather than a continuum, which would allow students to make more informed decisions about college goals and career aspirations.

*Keywords:* one-size-fits-all, college-readiness, career-readiness, literature review

In today's society, graduating from high school, enrolling in college, and obtaining a bachelor's degree are seen as the primary means of increasing one's cultural capital and upward social mobility (Barnes & Slate, 2010; Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Leonhardt, 2005, 2011). Additionally, Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson (2011) stated, "Education beyond high school is the passport to the American dream" (p. 2). However, a plethora of college-readiness researchers (Barnes & Slate, 2010, 2011; Barnes et al., 2010; Conley, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2005; Kahlenberg, 2010; Symonds et al., 2011; Leonhardt, 2005, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b) have reported that students in our nation's high schools are earning diplomas, but they are graduating without the knowledge, skills, and metacognitive strategies needed to be successful at postsecondary institutions. Although college-readiness is an ambitious,

viable tenet for student success at the postsecondary level, federal and state policy makers must understand that students and patterns of college attendance are changing rapidly (Symonds et al., 2011). The diversity of students, coupled with the numerous avenues of college attendance, requires that law makers and school administrators look beyond high-stakes testing, stringent accountability measures, and mountains of statistical data as indicators of college-readiness. According to college-readiness researchers, the federal government's one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda has resulted in students who do not graduate from high school or in students who graduate but are not academically prepared or college-ready (Barnes & Slate, 2010, 2011; Barnes et al., 2010; Berliner, 2006; Kahlenberg, 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010; Swanson, 2008; Symonds et al., 2011; Zhao, 2009a).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this article, we reflect on the historical events that led to the reality of college readiness as the dominant value influencing the high school curriculum. Moreover, we examine the issue of college-readiness with the regard to the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda. Specifically, we argue that that college-readiness is itself a continuum and not a dichotomous variable (i.e., college-ready or not college-ready). Moreover, we contend that individuals may be college-ready for one level of postsecondary education but not necessarily for other levels. Finally, we discuss the broad dimensions of college-readiness.

### **The Road to One-Size-Fits-All**

For over 50 years, state and federal political leaders, higher education and secondary school (i.e., middle and high school) administrators and local community advocates have sought to improve student achievement at all levels. Also, the aforementioned groups have striven to increase high school graduation rates, college-readiness rates, and higher education degree attainment. To accomplish these extremely important goals, stakeholders at all political and educational levels have pushed to increase academic rigor and to set high expectations for all students. Although national legislation and federal policies mandated for public school systems since the 1950s have appeared to be in the best interest of student learning, most of the decisions to increase academic rigor were predicated on fear, which allowed the federal government a stronghold in public education, and whether intended or not, has created a stifling, ineffective one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda (Berliner, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b).

The first political maneuver on the road to the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda in public education began in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik, a small inconsequential, artificial satellite, by the Soviet Union, which directly challenged the eminence and prowess of the scientific research and development community in the United States, leading to the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 (Flattau et al., 2006; Zhao, 2009a). The enactment of the NDEA infused large sums of money into the American educational system to encourage students to study math, science, computer technology, and foreign languages, thereby allowing the federal government to, ever so benignly, create the road map for America's public education system. In the 10-year journey following the enactment of the NDEA (i.e., 1958-1967), the now one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda began to change the nation's academic landscape. Standardized tests administered to elementary and secondary students increased from 10 million to 45 million, and standardized testing in high school increased from one-third of the student population to nearly 100% (Flattau et al., 2006).

The second major political maneuver on the road to a one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda came in 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented then-President Ronald Reagan with *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (A Nation at Risk)*. In *A Nation at Risk*, the Commission reported that "American prosperity, security, and civility" were in serious jeopardy because the educational foundation on which the United States was built was rapidly eroding (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7). Ravitch (2010) stated that the statistics cited in *A Nation at Risk* indicated declining scores on national standardized achievement tests and poor performance on international assessments, which were rationalized as debilitating roadblocks by economic and political leaders. According to Zhao (2009a), President Reagan, whose decision was to abolish the U.S. Department of Education and who initially was not interested in the report but needed to bolster his chance of reelection, manipulated the information in *A Nation at Risk* to foreshadow impending economic doom and ensure the public that he and the Republican Party would change the course of America's educational system on the national forefront and in the international academic arena (Ansary, 2007). Schrag (2000) reported, that Reagan-era conservatives, "with the help of business leaders like IBM chairman Lou Gerstner, managed to convert a whole range of liberally oriented children's issues . . . into a debate focused almost exclusively on education and tougher-standards school reform" (p. 3). Through his use of the information in *A Nation at Risk*, President Reagan clearly delineated the direction of America's education system, driving the nation's education system more steadfastly toward the present one-size-fits-all agenda as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Ansary, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Tienken & Zhao, 2010; Zhao, 2009a).

The NCLB Act, although long and complex, exhibits a fairly simple policy premise: better academic outcomes for all students. Specifically, the NCLB Act requires that schools close the achievement gaps between middle- and upper-socioeconomic White students and their urban and rural lower-socioeconomic counterparts (Goldrick-Rab & Mazzeo, 2005). In a departure from previous revisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the NCLB Act mandates that schools meet proficiency targets or face sanctions, including restructuring and eventual closing (Goldrick-Rab & Mazzeo, 2005). Although the NCLB Act was explicitly aimed at changing academic achievement in the K-12 educational arena, it may have longer-term implications, particularly for college- and workforce-readiness (Educational Policy Institute, 2005; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Symonds et al., 2011). For example, organizational and instructional reforms in schools—

crucial to the success of academic achievement—are also likely to have an effect on how well students are prepared for access to and success in college (Goldrick-Rab & Mazzeo, 2005). Although the basic premise of educating all students appears to be an equitably sound choice, the NCLB Act has drastically changed the climate and culture of public education by utilizing high-stakes standardized test scores as the primary measure of student learning and school quality, disregarding most other positive attributes of students and professional educators and administrators. With high-stakes standardized state tests and harsh, punitive accountability measures as the supposed motivators for learning, students may become adept at test-taking, but they will be unprepared to be academically successful in postsecondary institutions (American College Test [ACT], 2010, 2011; Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Barnes & Slate, 2011; Symonds, 2011; Zhao, 2006, 2009a, 2009b).

### **College-Readiness Research**

Most policy makers, administrators, advocates, researchers, and practitioners agree that rigorous academic preparation is essential for today's young people to meet the demands of the 21st century global society (Achieve Inc., 2007, 2009, 2011; ACT, 2007, 2011; NCLB, 2002; Ravitch, 2010; Swanson, 2008; Symonds et al., 2011; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). However, with the one-size-fits-all agenda that has evolved as a result of the high-stakes testing and punitive accountability measures mandated by the NCLB Act at the federal, state, and local levels, the present reality is that far too many students falter at various stages of their academically rigorous journey from middle and high school through college without much understanding of how and why this life-changing phenomenon occurred (Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009). Noddings (2010) commented that “simply stating what students must know and be able to do is not enough to ensure the desired outcomes. When standardization is taken to mean universalization, the result may well be lower achievement for many students” (p. 29).

Test scores reported by the ACT (2011) in the annual college-readiness report indicated that only 25% of high school students nationally who took the ACT in 2011 were considered college-ready on all four college-readiness benchmarks. From the same report, the ACT (2011) revealed that the college-readiness rates in Arizona, Florida, and Texas (i.e., states with similar demographics), as measured by the four benchmarks, were 18%, 17%, and 24% respectively. In an investigation of college-readiness rates in Texas for school years ending in 2007, 2008, and 2009, 27 inferential research questions were analyzed to determine college-readiness rates of Black, Hispanic, and White high school graduates in reading, math and in both subjects (Barnes & Slate, 2011). All public high schools

in Texas that reported college-readiness data for the aforementioned subgroups were included in the study, utilizing data from the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System College Readiness Indicators, which reflect the use of standardized test scores. Of the 27 statistical analyses of college-readiness, statistically significant findings were present, revealing 19 large effect sizes, one near-large effect size, one moderate effect size, and six small effect sizes (Barnes & Slate, 2011; Barnes et al., 2010).

Differences in college-readiness rates were revealed for Black and Hispanic high school graduates for the 3 school years. Greater differences were exhibited between White and Hispanic high school graduates than between Black and Hispanic high school graduates over the 3-year period. Further, when college-readiness data were examined, the largest difference in college-ready graduate rates was between Black and White high school graduates. Although the college-readiness rate of White students was much higher than the college-readiness rates of their Black and Hispanic counterparts, college-readiness rates for reading, math, and both subjects across the 3-year period were low for all students included in the Texas study (Barnes & Slate, 2011). Ten years after the implementation of the NCLB Act, findings of annual ACT (2010, 2011) college-readiness reports, similar findings from the Texas college-readiness study (Barnes & Slate, 2011), and results of other studies (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2005; Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2005; Moore et al., 2010) throughout the first decade of the 21st century clearly indicate that the high-stakes testing and stringent accountability measures, which have perpetuated the one-size-fits-all college-readiness, agenda are not working.

The NCLB Act may have positive implications for college- and workforce-readiness; however, many researchers have argued that high-stakes testing and punitive accountability measures are detrimental to student learning, closing the achievement gap, lowering the dropout rate, increasing graduation rates, and preparing students for access to and success in academic endeavors beyond high school (Barnes et al., 2010; Berliner, 2006; Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006; Moore et al., 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Symonds et al., 2011; Tan, 2010; Tienken & Canton, 2009; Tienken & Zhao, 2010; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). Berliner (2006) stated that he and colleagues (i.e., Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2006, 2008; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005) argued that “high-stakes testing programs in most states were ineffective in achieving their intended purposes, and causing severe unintended negative effects, as well” (p. 950). These unintended consequences which Berliner (2006) outlined in his research still persist (Barnes et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Rojas-LeBouef

& Slate, 2011a, 2011b; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Symonds et al., 2011; Tan, 2010; Tienken & Canton, 2009; Tienken & Zhao, 2010; Zhao 2009a, 2009b). High-stakes testing and the punitive accountability measures mandated by the NCLB Act have been instrumental in creating the present one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda.

Another major issue that drives the NCLB Act and propagates the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is the supposed performance gap on international standardized tests that exists between students in the United States and students in other countries (Baker, 2007; Berliner, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Tan, 2010; Tienken, 2008; Tienken & Zhao, 2010). Policy makers have used international tests results, on which American high school students typically do not fare well, to disseminate ideas created a half century ago and perpetuated through different political iterations until now. Baker (2007) and Zhao (2009a, 2009b) indicated that the results of students' performance on international tests and their or their nations' economic well being is somewhat speculative. In his empirical study, Baker (2007), a retired U.S. Department of Education executive, examined the relationship of students' performance on international tests and several indicators of their countries' economic well being, the findings of which indicated a negative correlation or no correlation between the two variables.

In a number of empirical studies the relationship between scores on international tests and the economic strength of the 17 strongest economies in the world is actually negative, or lack the statistical strength to provide a cause and effect relationship between the two variables (Baker, 2007; Bils & Klenow, 1998; Bracey, 2003, 2005; Krueger, 1999; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002; Ramirez, Luo, Schofer, & Meyer, 2006; Tienken, 2008). Although superficial and without practical significance according to the aforementioned empirical studies, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) reported that the United States accounted for 25% of top science achievers among 15 year-olds worldwide, almost doubling the closest competitor. Fearfully, erroneously, and somewhat unethically, policy makers, corporate leaders, and the media have reduced the quality of education to standardized test scores that allow comparisons of students and school systems across state and international boundaries, which appeals to our society's need for simplistic, yet sometimes misleading, information, thereby strengthening the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda (Baker, 2007; Berliner, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2011a, 2011b; Tan, 2010; Tienken & Canton, 2009; Tienken & Zhao, 2010; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b).

In 2009, Arne Duncan, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, addressed the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, stating the need to

continue to increase learning standards and performance expectations within schools and school districts to improve the academic achievement of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). However, with the continued presence of low student academic achievement scores, low college-readiness rates, excessive high school dropout rates, and the wide and stable student achievement gap over the past decade, President Obama plans to ask Congress to amend the NCLB Act (Dillon, 2010).

Dillon (2010) reported that the Obama administration was proposing sweeping changes in the NCLB Act in an effort to ensure that U.S. high school students graduate college- and career-ready (CCR). Of utmost importance, the 2014 date for the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of 100% pass rate by all students, which has been branded as a "utopian goal," would be eliminated (Dillon, 2010, p. 2). Additionally, the AYP measure would be revised to remove the harsh sanctions placed on underperforming schools by offering more positive incentives to promote higher student academic achievement in all subgroups, in an attempt to narrow the achievement gap between middle- and upper-class White students and their ethnically diverse counterparts (Dillon, 2010). An administrator from the U.S. Department of Education stated, "the administration will propose to replace the accountability system established in No Child Left Behind with a new system built around the goal of helping students graduate high school college- and career-ready" (Dillon, 2010, p. 1).

Although President Obama, in 2010, emphasized the need for college- and career-readiness for all high school graduates, the emphasis is clearly on college-readiness, at the exclusion of other educational alternatives. Further, Adelman (2012) stated that the U.S. Department of Education's "policies rightly say that college- and career-readiness needs to mean that students are actually college ready," which indicates that the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is the standard by which all public high school students in the United States are measured.

### **Unintended Consequences of One-Size-Fits-All College-Readiness**

The one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda of high-stakes standardized testing and punitive accountability measures as mandated by the NCLB Act has created a paradox in one of its primary tenets—greater academic achievement for all students, especially students of poverty and culturally diverse backgrounds. Instead of creating the new equitable, academic environment, whereby all students must be given the same opportunity to learn, the opposite has occurred to perpetuate the learning environment it was mandated to stop (Ryan, Matheson, & Morgenthau, 2003; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). Students from the wealthiest families, along with students of families whose household incomes

fall into the middle- and upper middle-socioeconomic ranges, typically score well on standardized tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Zhao, 2009a). These wealthy groups of students who do not attend private schools usually attend public schools that, on a day-by-day basis, are not bothered by the high-stakes testing and punitive accountability measures because the pass rates of students are extremely high (Berliner, 2006, 2008). High-stakes standardized tests hit our lower-socioeconomic and most ethnically-diverse students hardest and thereby forces the kind of education on the neediest group of students that disallows them to compete successfully with the children of families in the middle- and upper-socioeconomic groups (Anyon, 2005; Berliner, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2011a, 2011b; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). Narrowing curriculum, teaching to the test, and repetitive benchmarking that are present in schools for lower- socioeconomic, ethnically-diverse students do not prepare them for quality job training programs or for the better universities in the nation, which makes room for the children of the more privileged at elite universities (Berliner, 2006; Leonhardt, 2004, 2011; Nichols & Berliner, 2008).

According to Leonhardt (2004), researchers at the University of Michigan, and other major universities, have indicated that students attending the University of Michigan and similar state flagship universities were from predominantly wealthy families. Leonhardt (2004) reported,

Overall, at the 42 most selective state universities, including the flagship campuses in California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan and New York, 40 percent of this year's freshmen come from families making more than \$100,000, up from about 32 percent in 1999. . . . Nationwide, fewer than 20 percent of families make that much money. (p. 2)

In 2011, Leonhardt stated that 67% of the freshman class at 193 of the most selective colleges and universities in the United States came from the top fourth of the income distribution bracket, with only 15% of freshmen coming from the bottom half of the bracket. These statistics indicate that at many selective postsecondary institutions across the country students from the wealthiest families outnumber lower-, middle-, and upper-middle socioeconomic class students (Leonhardt, 2011).

Additionally, the College Board (2011) reported that SAT verbal and mathematics composite scores for students in the highest income brackets (i.e., \$100,000 and higher) ranged from 1065 to 1154. Scores for students in the lowest income brackets (\$40,000 or less) ranged from 896-944, indicating a gap of 169-210 points (College Board, 2011). Because the status quo for children from advantaged families is somewhat preserved though the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda,

middle- and upper-class families have no reason to oppose high-stakes testing openly for academic accountability because they know that their children will do well.

Another dilemma created by the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is that all students are placed on the same rigorous academic track. College- and career-ready may be the new buzz words or catch phrase of the 21st century, but with the political, economic, and educational focus and society's bandwagon mentality, the emphasis is clearly on college-ready (i.e., a 4-year baccalaureate degree) (Asch, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Symonds et al., 2011; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). Although college- and career-readiness is the 21st century mantra, "the word college is used as a synonym for bachelor's degree" (Rosenbaum et al., 2010, p. 3), and the word career is too often deemphasized (Asch, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Symonds et al., 2011). Presently, with the only measure of college-readiness primarily being standardized tests, college readiness may be more aptly defined as academic-preparedness (Barnes & Slate, 2010, 2011).

According to Rosenbaum et al. (2010), 89% of all high school graduates in 2004 planned to earn a bachelor's degree regardless of preparation and academic achievement. Although large numbers of students aspire to go to college, only 30% of young adults who attend college earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties (Symonds et al., 2011). Today's one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda has been promoted by business and economic leaders and perpetuated with political acumen to an American society that is willing to embrace the ideas of education and prosperity for their children, which is somewhat misleading.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education stated "that all schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards and outcomes for academic performance" (p. 73). Also, a major tenet of the Improving America's School Act of 1994 was that all students would leave the 12th grade having mastered challenging subjects, including: (a) English, (b) math, (c) science, (d) foreign languages, (e) civics and government, (f) economics, (g) art, (h) history, and (i) geography (Paris, 1994). According to Achieve, Inc (2011), most states now have college- and career-readiness curriculum guidelines in place for secondary students. Curricular guidelines typically follow a format similar to the academic guidelines suggested by the National Commission on Education Excellence (1983), including: "(a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science, and (f) 2 years of foreign language" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 70). To enhance college- and career-readiness, primarily college-readiness, a few states have increased

academic requirements for graduation to include 4 years of mathematics, English, science and social studies (Achieve, Inc., 2007, 2011). For example, Texas legislators enacted the Texas Administrative Code (TAC), 19, §74.63 in 2006 to increase course requirements for high school graduation by mandating that students entering the ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year would be required to take four courses in English, mathematics, science, and social studies (i.e., the 4 x 4 Plan) to graduate (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008). Although researchers agree that students should be college- and career-ready, the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is stultifying to many students who have aspirations beyond high school but fail to graduate because they cannot or will not meet the academic requirements placed on them (Asch, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Symonds et al., 2011).

Zhao (2009a) questioned the viability of the same strict academic requirements for all students, stating that “the solution is not more math, science, and reading, more testing; and more accountability as prescribed by NCLB. In fact, NCLB could lead America into deeper crisis” (p. 18). It is highly unlikely that increased curriculum requirements will have any effect on academic achievement, including reducing dropout rates and lessening the achievement gap. Simply increasing academic requirements and stating what students must know is not enough to ensure positive outcomes. According to Asch (2010), “college prep has become a one-size-fits-all approach to secondary education, and some students simply do not fit” (p. 35). Although common core classes are relevant in elementary and junior high school, older adolescents must be provided with a broad range of curricular options to keep them engaged in their educational pursuits of career goal aspirations. “In 21st century America, education beyond high school is the passport to the American Dream. But how much and what kind of post-secondary is really needed to prosper in the new American Economy” (Symonds et al., 2011, p. 2)? High schools should be designed and curriculum should be structured to help all students graduate, including students who plan to earn an occupational certificate, attain an associate’s degree, or complete a 4-year bachelor’s degree.

As the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda pushes students toward primarily 4-year baccalaureate degrees, at the exclusion of other viable educational options, those students who fail to measure up to the curricular expectations are implicitly told that they are not good enough. As the academic bar is arbitrarily raised and more tests are required to ensure that all students will be college-ready, more students will not be college ready. Many of these students, thinking that college is their only option, enroll in college without the academic preparation, interest in the subject matter, and knowledge

of what success in college requires; only to dropout before realizing the American dream.

In their report, *Help Wanted: Projections for Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*, for the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) revealed that postsecondary credential requirements for the workforce will increase steadily, but that 14 million middle-skill job openings will be filled with workers who earn an associate degree or occupational certificate. Surprisingly, 27% of jobs filled by workers with occupational certificates and licenses, but short of an associate’s degree, will earn more than average bachelor’s degree holders (Executive Office of the President Council of Economic Advisers, 2009; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Symonds et al., 2011). For approximately 30 years, policy makers have devised and promoted several iterations of curriculum requirements, high-stakes testing, and punitive accountability measures, which have led to the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda, but in reality, college-readiness is not a dichotomous variable (i.e., college-ready or not college-ready), but rather a continuum, which implies that college-readiness is not one-size-fits-all

Advocates for national curriculum and high-stakes testing insist that all students will be better prepared for postsecondary education and have more opportunities to live a prosperous and fulfilling life if they are required to meet the same curricular guidelines (Achieve Inc., 2011). However, to accomplish this daunting task, all students must be placed in traditional academic classes regardless of interests, aptitudes, and attitudes. Although George W. Bush was correct in stating that the United States should no longer allow “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (as cited in Asch, 2011, p. 35) by offering a quality education to all students; however, he may have inadvertently propagated the one-size-fits-all college readiness agenda, creating the “bigotry of inappropriate expectations” for many students (Asch, 2010, p. 35). Robert Schwartz, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, stated that college, in the traditional sense of the institution, was not for every high school graduate (as cited in Baron, 2011). Further, Symonds and colleagues (2011) reported that “only about 4 in 10 Americans have obtained either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree by their mid-twenties...roughly another 10% have earned a certificate” (p. 6), indicating further that the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda is not appropriate for all students.

Some researchers (e.g., Conley, 2007) argue postsecondary education is different from high school and college readiness is fundamentally different from high school competence. Over the last decade, although the high school graduation rate has remained the same, the overall percentage of students who have left high school

able to attend college has improved by only 9% (Greene & Winters, 2005). At the National Governors Association, Bill Gates warned the audience that American high school education was obsolete (de León, 2005).

### Conclusion

Standardization, as mandated by the NCLB Act, and homogenization of curriculum, as a result of the NCLB Act's stringent accountability measures, has not decreased the dropout rate, lessened the achievement gap, increased graduation rates, or improved college-readiness rates (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Ravich, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Symonds et al., 2011; Zhao, 2009a, 2009b). As a result, college graduation rates have not improved because policy makers, educational leaders, and classroom teachers, either knowingly or unknowingly, have reverberated that college equals success, but simply stated, many students do not fit well in the one-size-fits-all college-readiness agenda. One vital step in quelling the aforementioned academic dilemmas may be differentiation; offerings of a variety of well-developed, clearly-focused, career-path options linked to community college and 4-year university majors. Visible, viable options, embedded with rigorous academic curriculum related to those options, would allow students to make informed choices that piqued their interests and enhanced their talents for specific careers; especially those students who have career aspirations that are alternative to the traditional 4-year baccalaureate degree. Perhaps, with more focus on college-and career-readiness options, more clearly-focused pathways to their chosen career, avenues for completion could include less pitfalls and roadblocks, thereby allowing more students to complete their academic journey through high school and college.

Educators, educational leaders, and policy makers, starting with Grade 6 students, need to play a major role in ensuring that students are prepared for some sort of postsecondary education. Efforts to encourage such preparation could occur through encouraging parent involvement, providing college and career planning information, and assisting students in the planning for their postsecondary education (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Such planning should be for going to college or for planning for a career. We believe that it should not be focused entirely on going to college.

### References

- Achieve Inc. (2007). *Aligning high school graduation requirements with the real world: A road map for the states*. Retrieved from [http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve\\_PolicyBrief\\_Dec18v4.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve_PolicyBrief_Dec18v4.pdf)
- Achieve Inc. (2009). *Closing the expectation gap 2009: Fourth annual 50-state progress report on the alignment of high school policies with the demands of college and careers*. Retrieved from <http://www.achieve.org/files/50-state-2009.pdf>
- Achieve Inc. (2011). *Closing the expectation gap 2011: Sixth annual 50-state progress report on the alignment of high school policies with the demands of college and careers*. Retrieved from <http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveClosingtheExpectationsGap2011.pdf>
- ACT. (2007). *Rigor at risk: Reaffirming quality in the high school core curriculum*. Iowa City: ACT.
- ACT. (2010). *The condition of college and career readiness 2011*. Iowa City, IA: ACT. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr10/pdf/ConditionofCollegeandCareerReadiness2010.pdf>
- ACT. (2011). *The condition of college and career readiness 2011*. Iowa City, IA: ACT. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr11/pdf/ConditionofCollegeandCareerReadiness2011.pdf>
- Adleman, C. (2012, September 27). Does "college-and career-ready" mean what it says? *The Quick and the Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.quickanded.com/2012/09/does-%e2%80%9ccollege-and-career-ready%e2%80%9d-mean-what-it-says.html>
- Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2002). High-stakes testing, uncertainty, and student learning. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(18). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n18/>
- Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2003). The effects of high-stakes testing on student motivation and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 60(5), 32-38.
- Ansary, T. (2007). Education at risk. *Edutopia*, 3(2), 48-53. Retrieved from <http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/edutopia/0307/index.php?startid=Cover1>
- Anyon, J. (2005). What "counts" as educational policy? Notes toward a new paradigm. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(1), 65-88.
- Asch, C. M. (2010). The inadvertent bigotry of inappropriate expectations. *Education Week*, 29(35), 35.
- Baker, K. (2007). Are international tests worth anything? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(2), 101-104.
- Balfanz, R. (2009). Can the American high school become an avenue of advancement for all? *The Future of Children*, 19(1), 17-38. doi:10.1353/foc.0.0025
- Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts?* Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Center for the Social Organization of Schools.
- Barnes, W. B., & Slate, J. R. (2010). College-readiness: The current state of affairs. *Academic*



- Leadership: The Online Journal*, 8(4). Retrieved from <http://www.academicleadership.org/article/college-readiness-the-current-state-of-affairs>
- Barnes, W. B., & Slate, J. R. (2011). College-readiness rates in Texas: A statewide, multiyear study of ethnic differences. *Education and Urban Society*. doi:10.1177/0013124511423775
- Barnes, W., Slate, J. R., & Rojas-LeBouef, A. M. (2010). College-readiness and academic preparedness: The same concepts? *Current Issues in Education*, 13(4). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/>
- Baron, K. (2011). *A schism of college readiness: Multiple paths or college focus for all?* Retrieved from <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2011/04/07/a-schism-on-college-readiness/>
- Berliner, D. C. (2006). Our impoverished view of educational research. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 949-995.
- Bils, M., & Klenow, P. J. (1998). *Does schooling cause growth, or the other way around?* (Working Paper No.6393). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Bracey, G. W. (2005). Research: Put out over PISA. *Phi Delta Kappan*, (86)10, 797-798.
- Bracey, G. W. (2003). April foolishness: The 20th anniversary of a Nation at Risk. *Phi Delta Kappan*, (84)8, 616-621.
- Braun, H. I., Wang, A., Jenkins, F., & Weinbaum, E. (2006). *The Black-White achievement gap: Do state policies matter?* *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(8). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n8/>
- Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Center on Education and the Workforce: Georgetown University. Retrieved from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf>
- Carpenter, D. M., Ramirez, A., & Severn, L. (2006). Gap or gaps: Challenging the singular definition of the achievement gap. *Education and Urban Society*, 39(1), 113-117. doi:10.1177/0013124506291792
- College Board. (2011). *2011 college-bound seniors: Total group profile report*. Retrieved from [http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/cbs2011\\_total\\_group\\_report.pdf](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/cbs2011_total_group_report.pdf)
- Conley, D. T. (2007). *Redefining college readiness*. Retrieved from Educational Policy Improvement Center website: <https://www.epiconline.org/files/pdf/RedefiningCollegeReadiness.pdf>
- Conley, D. T. (2010). *College and career ready: Helping all students succeed beyond high school*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- de León, A. G.(2005). America's literacy challenge: Teaching adolescents to read to learn. *Carnegie Results*. Retrieved from <http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/Americas%20Literacy%20Challenge%20Teaching%20Adolescents%20to%20Read%20to%20Learn.pdf>
- Dillon, S. (2010, February 1). Administration outlines proposed changes to "No Child" law. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/education/02child.html>
- Educational Policy Institute. (2005). *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Pathways to College Network framework: Mutually supportive visions and complementary goals*. Stafford, VA.
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Pub. L. 89-10, 108 Stat. 3519 (1965).
- Executive Office of the President Council of Economic Advisers. (2009). *Preparing the workers of today for jobs of tomorrow*. Retrieved from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Jobs\\_of\\_the\\_Future.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Jobs_of_the_Future.pdf)
- Flattau, P. E., Bracken, J., Van Atta, R., Bandeh-Ahmadi, A., de la Cruz, R., & Sullivan, K. (2006). *The National Defense Education Act of 1958: Selected outcomes*. Washington, DC: Science and Technology Policy Institute.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., & Mazzeo, C. F. (2005). What No Child Left Behind means for college access. *Review of Research in Education*, 29, 107-129.
- Greene, J. P., & Winters, M. A. (2005). *Public high school graduation and college-readiness rates: 1991-2002*. (Education Working Paper No. 8). Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute.
- Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-382, 108 Stat. 3518 (1994).
- Kahlenberg, R. D. (2010, September 22). 10 myths about legacy preferences in college admissions. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/10-Myths-About-Legacy/124561/>
- Konstantopoulos, S., & Hedges, L. (2005, May). *Trends in Hispanic-White achievement differences*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA.
- Krueger, A. B. (1999, May). Experimental estimates of education production functions. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 114(2), 497-532.
- Leonhardt, D. (2004, April 22). As wealthy fill top colleges, new efforts to level the field. *New York*



- Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/22/us/as-wealthy-fill-top-colleges-concerns-grow-over-fairness.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
- Leonhardt, D. (2005, May 24). The college dropout boom. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/national/class/EDUCATION-FINAL.html?pagewanted=print>
- Leonhardt, D. (2011, May 25). Top colleges, largely for the elite. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/business/economy/25leonhardt.html?\\_r=1&ref=economicscene](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/business/economy/25leonhardt.html?_r=1&ref=economicscene)
- Marchant, G. J., Paulson, S. E., & Shunk, A. (2006). Relationships between high-stakes testing policies and student achievement after controlling for demographic factors in aggregated data. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(30). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n30/>
- Moore, G., Slate, J. R., Edmonson, S., Combs, J. P., Bustamante, R., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2010). High school students and their lack of preparedness for college: A statewide study. *Education and Urban Society*, 42(7), 817-838. doi:10.1177/0013124510379619
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Defense Education Act of 1958, Pub. L. No. 85-864, 72 Stat. 1581 (1958).
- Nichols, S. N., & Berliner, D. C. (2006). The inevitable corruption of indicators and educators through high-stakes testing. Tempe, AZ: College of Education, Education Policy Studies Laboratory Report EPSL-0503-101-EPRU. Retrieved from <http://www.asu.edu>
- Nichols, S. N., & Berliner, D. C. (2008). Why has high-stakes testing so easily slipped into contemporary life? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(9), 672-676.
- Nichols, S. N., Glass, G. V., & Berliner, D. C. (2005). High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability pressure increase student learning? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, (14)1. Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/vi4n1/>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-111, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Noddings, M. (2010). Differentiate, don't standardize. *Education Week*, 29(17), 29, 31. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/01/14/17noddings-comm.h29.html>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2009). *Top of the class. High performers in science in PISA 2006*. Author. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/17/42645389.pdf>
- Paris, K. (1994). A leadership model for planning and implementing change for school-to-work transition (pp. 22-25). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center on Education and Work.
- Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, H. A. (2002). *Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update*. World Bank Working Paper Series, No. 2881. Retrieved from <http://citeseer.ist.psu.edu/psacharopoulos02returns.html>
- Ramirez, F. O., Luo, X., Schofer, E., & Meyer, J. W. (2006, November). Student achievement and national economic growth. *American Journal of Education*, 113(1), 1-29.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., & Coca, V. (2009). College readiness: The challenge for urban high schools. *The Future of Children*, 19(1), 185-210. doi:10.1353/foc.0.0024
- Rojas-Lebouef, A., & Slate, J. R. (2011a, October 21). *The Achievement Gap between White and Non-White Students: A Conceptual Analysis*. Retrieved from the Connexions Web site: <http://cnx.org/content/m41405/1.1/>
- Rojas-Lebouef, A., & Slate, J. R. (2011b, May 11). *Reading and math differences between Hispanic and White students in Texas: A 16-year analysis*. Retrieved from the Connexions Web site: <http://cnx.org/content/m38297/1.3/>
- Rosenbaum, J. E., Stephan, J. L., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2010). Beyond one-size-fits-all college dreams: Alternative pathways to desirable careers. *American Educator*, 34(3), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2010/Rosenbaum.pdf>
- Ryan, J. E., Matheson, W. L., & Morgenthau, R. M. (2004). The perverse incentives of the No Child Left Behind Act. *New York University Law Review*, 79, 932-989.
- Savitz-Romer, M., Jager-Hyman, J., & Coles, A. (2009). *Removing roadblocks to rigor: Linking academic and social supports to ensure college readiness and success*. Washington, DC: Pathways to College Network, Institute for Higher Education Policy. Retrieved from

- [http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/uploadedFiles/Pathways\\_To\\_College\\_Network/About\\_Us/Pathways\\_Publications/Roadblocks.pdf](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/uploadedFiles/Pathways_To_College_Network/About_Us/Pathways_Publications/Roadblocks.pdf)
- Schrag, P. (2000). *Education and the election: Political debate about school reform is largely between the center and the right*. Retrieved from <http://www.commondreams.org/views/021800-103.htm>
- Swanson, C. B. (2008). *Cities in crisis: A special analytical report on high school graduation*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/media/citiesin crisis040108.pdf>
- Symonds, W. C., Schwartz, R. B., & Ferguson, R. (2011). *Pathways to prosperity: Meeting the challenge of preparing young Americans for the 21st century*. Boston, MA: Pathways to Prosperity Project and Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news\\_events/features/2011/Pathways\\_to\\_Prosp erity\\_Feb2011.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2011/Pathways_to_Prosp erity_Feb2011.pdf)
- Tan, S. H. (2010). Singapore's educational reforms: The case for un-standardizing curriculum and reducing testing. *American Association of School Administrators Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(4), 50-58.
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2008). *Texas College and Career Readiness Standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.the cb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=EADF962E-0E3E-DA80-BAAD2496062F3CD8>
- Tienken, C. H. (2008). Rankings of international achievement test performance and economic strength: Correlation or conjecture. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 3(4), 1-15.
- Tienken, C. H., & Canton, D. A. (2009). National curriculum standards: Let's think it over. *American Association of School Administrators Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(3), 3-9.
- Tienken, C. H., & Zhao, Y. (2010). Common core national curriculum standards: More questions ... and answers. *American Association of School Administrators Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(4), 3-11
- U. S. Department of Education. (2009). *Education Stakeholders Forum*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/09/09242009.html>
- Wimberley, G. L., & Noeth, R. J. (2005). *College readiness begins in middle school*. Retrieved from ACT Research and Policy Issues website: <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/CollegeReadiness.pdf>
- Zhao, Y. (2006). Are we fixing the wrong thing? *Educational Leadership*, 63(8), 28-31.
- Zhao, Y. (2009a). *Catching up or leading the way: American education in the age of globalization*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Zhao, Y. (2009b). Comments on common core standards initiative. *American Association of School Administrators Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(3), 46-54.

Appendix  
Definition of Terms

**College Readiness**

The cognitive skills and strategies gained through successful completion of rigorous high school coursework, while at the same time, facilitating students' development of the requisite set of metacognitive skills and strategies necessary for college success—creativity, critical thinking, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-regulation, which will allow them to develop an awareness and understanding of the academic and non-academic expectations of entering and succeeding at postsecondary institutions, thereby internalizing a college-going attitude, constitutes college readiness.

**One-Size-Fits-All College-Readiness Agenda**

Policy makers, educational leaders, and classroom teachers, either knowingly or unknowingly, have reverberated that a college degree equals success, and all secondary students, regardless of postsecondary aspirations are required to complete the same rigorous coursework, where success is measured by grades and standardized test scores

**Article Citation**

Barnes, W., & Slate, J. R. (2013). College-readiness is not one-size-fits-all. *Current Issues in Education*, 16(1). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1070>

**Author Notes**

Wally Barnes

Reading Center, Sam Houston State University

[wbb001@shsu.edu](mailto:wbb001@shsu.edu)

Wally Barnes, Ed.D. is Director of the Reading Center at Sam Houston State University. His research interests are in college readiness and developmental education issues. Correspondence regarding this article may be directed to Dr. Barnes at

[wbb001@shsu.edu](mailto:wbb001@shsu.edu)

John R. Slate

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, Sam Houston State University

[jrs051@shsu.edu](mailto:jrs051@shsu.edu)

John R. Slate, Ph.D. is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University where he teaches basic and advanced statistics, academic and professional writing, and proposal writing. His research interests are in the use of state and national educational databases for school reform



**Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Manuscript received: 8/30/12

Revisions received: 10/11/12

Accepted: 12/26/12



## **Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

---

Volume 16, Number 1

January 14, 2013

ISSN 1099-839X

---

Authors hold the copyright to articles published in *Current Issues in Education*. Requests to reprint *CIE* articles in other journals should be addressed to the author. Reprints should credit *CIE* as the original publisher and include the URL of the *CIE* publication. Permission is hereby granted to copy any article, provided *CIE* is credited and copies are not sold.

---



### **Editorial Team**

#### **Executive Editors**

**Melinda A. Hollis**  
**Rory Schmitt**

#### **Assistant Executive Editors**

**Laura Busby**  
**Elizabeth Reyes**

#### **Layout Editors**

**Bonnie Mazza**  
**Elizabeth Reyes**

#### **Recruitment Editor**

**Hillary Andrelchik**

#### **Copy Editors/Proofreaders**

**Lucinda Watson**

#### **Authentications Editor**

**Lisa Lacy**

#### **Technical Consultant**

**Andrew J. Thomas**

#### **Section Editors**

**Hillary Andrelchik**  
**Michelle Crowley**  
**Ayfer Gokalp**  
**Darlene Michelle Gonzales**

**Courtney Hart**  
**David Isaac Hernandez-Saca**  
**Sultan Kilinc**  
**Yoonsu Kim**

**Linda S. Krecker**  
**Carol Masser**  
**Bonnie Mazza**  
**Constantin Schreiber**

#### **Faculty Advisors**

**Dr. Gustavo E. Fischman**  
**Dr. Jeanne M. Powers**

---