

Student Preparedness: College Ready or Career Ready?

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Introduction

College and Career readiness has been the focus of several major educational initiatives. Within this focus, a question has emerged as to whether or not the skills required for college readiness are similar to those required for career readiness (Finn & Petrilli, 2010; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have included a college and career readiness component to help teachers align their instruction with college and workforce expectations. Many stakeholders believe students exiting high school are not being fully prepared for the demands of college or a career (Stone & Lewis, 2012). Are the skills needed to succeed in a college setting different from those needed for a career setting? Aligning with priority three of the National Research Agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016), this research sought to explore the college versus career ready question through teacher's open-ended responses by determining the variables that make college and career readiness similar or different from one another.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The guiding theory and framework for this research included Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986) and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BBTHD) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Jointly SCT and BBTHD were connected to create the Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century providing a systems approach to prepare students to be both college and career ready (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). Within the model students develop learning, career and life skills that allow them to become life ready individuals prepared to be responsible citizens in their homes, schools and communities.

Methodology

A non-experimental, descriptive survey research design was utilized for this study to collect data from 191 teachers in Florida. Data collection followed Dillman's tailored design method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). As part of a larger quantitative study, focused on teacher perceptions of college versus career readiness, the research question posed to teachers in Florida was, 'Do you think the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of a student to be career ready differ from the skills required to be college ready?' If yes, 'Please explain why you think the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of a student to be career ready differ from those skills required to be college ready.' Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the first stage, each member of the research team separately analyzed ten of the total qualitative responses (n = 95). Codes were individually established, the research team met and minor adjustments were agreed upon to establish interrater reliability to compare and contrast the remaining open-ended responses.

Results/ Findings

Findings revealed four overarching themes: skill sets, academics, environment, and expectations. The college ready skill sets theme revealed study skills with a testing and core academic performance focus existed. Academics, uncovered a broader, analytical, and abstract approach existed. A focus on preparing for the future appeared in college readiness skills, whereas career

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readiness focused on the here and now. Career ready skills focused less on academic skills and more on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Employability and technical skills were revealed as key competencies needed for career readiness in a “learn as you go” environment. Within career readiness, a sense of professionalism was expected more so than in college readiness. Academic expectations differed between college and career readiness, as college readiness focused on higher academic levels, emphasizing core concepts, study skills, and being analytical. Career readiness academic expectations surfaced as technical skills, specific training, learning through hands-on/applied activities, and flexibility of thought.

The college environment was described to be more structured and forgiving. Students use college as a time to mature and figure things out, with more flexibility to explore various career options. Students are not completely independent from their parental support and are primarily focused on entering college and receiving high test scores, with little innovative thought. The career ready environment offers less formative assessment opportunities, has less room for error and expects the individual to initiate and complete projects with self-direction while being a contributing member of society. College ready requires a higher academic standard with little to no remediation, meeting teacher’s standards, whereas career ready expects professionalism, being interactive with others, and producing an accurate and quality end product.

Conclusions

Teachers in Florida believe there are differences between the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of students to be college versus career ready. College ready skill sets focus more on academic skills whereas, career ready skill sets focus more on professional and people skills. College ready academics are more focused on scholastic ability and study skills whereas career ready academics are focused on hands on job training. The college ready environment is more independent, structured, and forgiving, whereas the career ready environment is less structured and teamwork oriented. College ready expectations are more focused on academic preparedness and meeting teacher expectations whereas career readiness expectations encourage employees to be professional, responsible, and show initiative. The research question primarily focused on self-perception, therefore respondents’ perceived competencies and their past experiences in high school, college, and career may have had an effect on their responses. This research supports the notion that the environment surrounding students affects how they view themselves, their academic success, and how they interact with various experiences on a variety of levels. The student’s environment in a college or career setting influences requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are impacted by their education and experience as depicted in the Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016).

Impact on Profession

Understanding the differences in skill sets, academics, environment, and expectations between college and career readiness can assist parents, educators, and advisors in becoming more aware of how students destined to pursue college or a career will need to be mentored. Likewise, students making the decision to enter college or a career can be informed of the two paths by letting them picture where they best see themselves fitting to meet their overall goals. Educators need to become more aware that not all students will go to college, but all students will one day embark upon a career and thus, need to be prepared for whichever path they choose.

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