



Developing a Future Orientation:

How CCRE Schools Focused on Preparing Students for Life After High School

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Introduction

For today’s high school graduates, continuing their education and earning a postsecondary degree or credential is a likely necessity for securing a “good job”—a job that can sustain a family. This was not the case for previous generations. In 1991, workers with a high school diploma or less education held nearly a third of the good jobs in the United States. By 2016, this had shrunk to just 20 percent—that is, by 2016, 80 percent of jobs that paid a family-sustaining wage required at least some postsecondary education.¹ Yet the recognition of this reality has been slow, with many schools still focusing on high school graduation as the finish line of a student’s education and the end of their obligation to the student.

However, in recent years K-12 systems have developed strategies to increase the number of their students who go on to college. One such strategy is early college high schools, small schools that integrate high school and college experiences. They provide students in grades 9-12 the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma and either a postsecondary credential (usually an associate degree) or two years of transferrable college credit.

As the early college model has grown in popularity in the U.S., some comprehensive high schools have adopted and adapted the model to increase the number of their students who graduate, better prepare their students for college, and ultimately, increase the number of their students who enroll in college. The College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE) project, led by Columbus State Community College, was a large-scale effort across multiple comprehensive high schools to increase the number of high school students ready for college and/or a career through increasing access to college-level courses and implementing early college design principles.

¹ Carnevale, A. P., Strohl, J., Ridley, N., & Gulish, A. (2018). *Three educational pathways to good jobs: High school, middle skills, and bachelor’s degree*. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/good-jobs-project/>

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For participating schools, the project’s emphasis on college and career preparation required them to expand and enhance the opportunities and supports they provided to prepare students for postsecondary success. These activities exposed students to the idea that they needed to actively plan for their future and helped them develop a clearer vision for their life after high school. At the same time, building and refining their career and college programming prompted an evolution in how the schools conceived of their role: rather than just focusing on getting students to graduation, the schools began to see their ultimate goal as preparing all students for success after high school. This longer-term perspective that focused on preparing students for their life after high school can be thought of as a “future orientation.” It represents an important shift for both the schools and the students in how they engage in the project and purpose of schooling. This brief describes the ways in which CCRE schools developed a future orientation through engaging students in the planning of and preparation for their postsecondary life.



The College and Career Readiness Expansion Project

The CCRE project aimed to support economic development in the Central Ohio region. Seven area school districts, with 17 high schools, participated in the project. Participating districts had a minimum of 40 percent of their students considered economically disadvantaged. Schools received services from Columbus State, as well as other regional and national partners, which included staff professional development and leadership coaching. With this support, districts were expected to implement school-wide reforms based on four Early College Design Principles:

1. **A Career- and College-Ready Academic Program**, focusing on improved instructional practices and early access to college courses, as well as pathways that incorporate work-based learning;
2. **A Career and College Headstart**, including exposure to a college culture, instruction in college-readiness behaviors, and exposure to career activities;
3. **Wraparound Student Supports** that provide students with academic and social-emotional supports as well as assistance with applying to college and for financial aid; and
4. **School-Level Organizational Practices** that include structures to support students, ongoing collaboration and professional learning among staff, and the use of data.

Collectively, these Design Principles supported the project’s goals of increasing the number of students enrolling and succeeding in college preparatory classes, increasing the number of students enrolling and succeeding in college-level courses while in high school, and increasing the number of students graduating from high school.

The observations presented in this brief come primarily from a series of school site visits during the project's five-year implementation. Six high schools from five of the districts were selected for the site visits in consultation with Columbus State to represent varying demographics, urbanicity, and implementation activities. Staff from the SERVE Center,² the external evaluation partner, visited each site in the falls of 2017, 2018, and 2019 (the second, third, and fourth years of the project) and spoke with teachers, counselors, principals, and other school leaders, as well as district staff, about their experiences with and observations of the project's implementation. Additional interviews with staff from project partners, conducted in the fifth year of the project, also informed the brief.

What is a Future Orientation?

For a school, a future-oriented culture means they believe that a high school diploma is not the end goal of K-12 schooling (a traditional understanding) but a milestone on the way to the additional education or training that a student will need to have a successful future—and furthermore, that it is the responsibility of the K-12 system to prepare students for postsecondary success. For students, a future orientation means having a vision for what they want to do after high school and developing a plan for achieving it. A school's future orientation directly impacts its students; for some students, holding a future orientation is only possible because of the culture of their school and the supports the school provides.

Not only is a future orientation a departure from the conventional understanding of the purpose of K-12 schooling, but the concept is a different approach to how high school students prepare for their future than is typically



represented in the research literature. Most research has focused on understanding “college readiness” and “career readiness” and the ways that schools can foster each of them.

College readiness is increasingly understood as a “complex and multifaceted” process requiring that students acquire not just academic skills, but also behaviors and attitudes that support academic success, an understanding of the process of applying and transitioning to college, and the development of a college-going identity.³ Schools can play a large part in helping students develop all of these elements of college readiness, not just academic skills. Strategies schools use to cultivate college readiness include providing comprehensive advising on applying to colleges and for financial aid, helping students stay on track for the myriad deadlines in the application process, preparing students for the SAT or ACT, and instruction on skills that contribute

² SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro serve.uncg.edu

³ Edmunds, J. A., Arshavsky, N., Lewis, K. C., Thrift, B., Unlu, F., & Furey, J. (2017). Preparing students for college: Lessons learned from the early college. *NASSP Bulletin*, 101(2), 117-141.
Duncheon, J. C. & Relles, S. R. (2019). “A ditcher and a scholar”: Figuring college-going identities in an urban magnet high school. *Teachers College Record*, 121, 1-36.



to academic success, such as time management and note-taking. Furthermore, these types of supports, coupled with schoolwide practices and attitudes that promote the idea of going to college—for example, rituals to celebrate students’ college admissions and teachers talking to students about going to college—foster a college-going culture in a school. For students, attending a school with a college-going culture is an important factor in developing their college-going identity and thus their college readiness.⁴

Being career-ready requires a combination of hard and soft skills that position a student to successfully apply their core academic knowledge in the workplace. These skills include quantitative reasoning, identifying trends from data, data-based decision-making, and other critical-thinking skills.⁵ Many career-readiness frameworks also emphasize attitudes and behaviors necessary for the demands of the modern workplace, such as adaptability, initiative and the ability to work independently, time management, and the ability to work effectively within diverse teams.⁶ As with college

readiness, schools can play a role in developing this suite of skills. In academic classes, rigorous instructional practices that encourage students to collaborate, communicate about their learning, and practice solving complex problems contribute to career readiness. Outside the classroom, work-based learning opportunities are an important way for students to develop the skills and mindsets necessary for successful employment. Work-based learning—which can range from job shadowing and career-related competitions to internships—is facilitated by schools and ideally aligns classwork with an authentic workplace experience while providing students the chance to reflect on their learning.⁷

The process of becoming career-ready or college-ready—the acquisition of requisite skills and experiences, and the development of the necessary identity—is framed as getting students to a readiness status. A future orientation, on the other hand, is a belief held by students and schools that becoming college- or career-ready while students are in high school is important, even essential. Students with a future orientation are planning for the career and/or education they want to pursue after high school graduation, while future-oriented schools see their purpose as getting students on a path to their next step and providing them with the supports they need to be successful. A future orientation combines the pursuits of college readiness and career readiness and suggests that it is the focus on the next step that is paramount. A staff member at one of the support organizations partnering on the CCRE project described how the project prompted schools and students to reframe their perspective on preparing for life after high school: “[There was] a shift from, perhaps, postsecondary means ‘college’ to an opening up of ‘postsecondary means a lot of things.’ And it isn’t about college; it isn’t about entering the workforce. It’s truly about prosperity and the future.”

⁴Duncheon & Belles. Edmunds, J. A., Arshavsky, N., Lewis, K. C., Thrift, B., Unlu, F., & Furey, J. (2017). Preparing students for college: Lessons learned from the early college. *NAASP Bulletin*, 101(2), 117-141. Duncheon, J.C. & Belles, S.R. (2019). “A ditcher and a scholar”: Figuring college-going identities in an urban magnet high school. *Teachers College Record*, 121, 1-36.

⁵act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/workkeys-for-educators/nrcr.html

⁶Partnership for 21st Century Learning. (2019). Framework for 21st century learning definitions. Retrieved from battelleforkids.org/networks/p21/frameworks-resources

⁷cte.ed.gov/wbltoolkit



How CCRE Schools Developed a Future Orientation

For the CCRE schools, strengthening their college readiness and career readiness programs and supports led them to adopt a future orientation while engendering the same perspective in their students. For one participating district, this evolution was part of an intentional effort to help students transition more smoothly to the next phase of their life. As the district coordinator explained, re-imagining their role was necessary to better serve students:

Most of our students, for decades, would graduate, feel good about themselves, and then really wonder what their next step was and have a difficult time. That's not happening anymore; that's not our goal anymore. Our goal is beyond that. How scary is it for a student to be in the senior year of high school and not know what's going to happen after graduation day? That has to be terrifying. We are trying to make sure they are getting the experience while they're in high school and make sure they're [on a] path.

As the project progressed, the evolving future orientation of schools was evident in the attitudes of teachers, staff, and administrators, as well as the variety of ways they engaged students in thinking about, planning for, and building a foundation for their postsecondary life. Specifically, the site visits revealed that CCRE schools developed their future orientation and promoted it in their students by: 1) setting clear expectations, 2) exposing students to career options, 3) requiring students to participate in career planning, 4) offering early access to college courses, and 5) providing supports for solidifying postsecondary plans.

Setting Clear Expectations

Foundational to a school's future orientation is a shared belief among school personnel that all students can become college-ready or career-ready. But nearly as important is ensuring that all students are aware that the school believes they can and should become college- and/or career-ready, and furthermore, that they are expected to graduate prepared for their next step. As one principal explained, clear postsecondary expectations help, "students understand that there's a point to all of this [high school]." Hamilton Township High School made their expectations for students

unambiguous and simple: all students were to graduate as one of “The Three Es” (enrolled, employed, or enlisted)—that is, either employed with a job, enrolled in college, or enlisted in the military. The slogan was posted prominently around the school, and counselors, teachers, and administrators reiterated it by regularly asking students to think about “what E” would be their next step after graduation.

Exposing Students to Career Options

To help students choose a pathway to pursue, many of the schools exposed students to career options by bringing in speakers to share their experiences with students. At Whitehall Yearling High School, a counselor hosted Future Fridays, a twice-monthly event for students to hear from people in different occupations. Hamilton Township used data about student career interests to provide small assemblies featuring career representatives for the students interested in a particular profession. And The Reynoldsburg STEM Academy celebrated the end of every quarter with a Quarter Quell, an event that included speakers from the health sciences and human services fields (the career theme of the school) as well as former students who spoke about their own postsecondary journeys. For many students, these types of events provided a valuable introduction to career options that they might not have otherwise known about. But as the assistant principal at (HS)2 explained, these events were also about “making those connections to the future”—that is, helping students understand how what they learn in high school applies to their life after.



Career Planning

In addition to sharing career options with students, most of the schools required students to go through some form of a career-planning process wherein they decided on a postsecondary path or goal and developed a timeline for the courses and other experiences they needed to get there. Several of the schools purchased Naviance⁸ as part of their work with CCRE and made use of its career-planning function. Students generally had dedicated class time, usually during advisory periods or English class, to take the program’s career assessments. The assessments varied by grade level: for ninth and tenth graders, they were about helping students discover their strengths and interests and introducing them to compatible career options, and for juniors and seniors, they focused on gauging students’ current postsecondary plans and the steps they still needed to take. The assessment results were used by school counselors⁹ to provide targeted assistance to students based on their goals. For instance, with the assessment results, counselors could easily generate a list of all the students in a grade interested in nursing or entering the military and do small-group sessions with them to address questions and help them plan courses or work-based learning opportunities. At the Reynoldsburg (HS)2 Academy, the school instituted small-group sessions of students in the same grade to guide them through the career-planning steps they needed to take each year. An administrator explained that this led to “more meaningful conversations with students about their future and what they need to do to be prepared.”

⁸<https://www.hobsons.com/solution/naviance/>

⁹ As part of CCRE, several schools brought on advisors from I Know I Can (iknowican.org), a Columbus-area college access program, or Communities in Schools (communitiesinschools.org), a national organization drop-out prevention and school success program, who assisted school counselors with providing college and career planning support.

College Course-taking

A cornerstone of the CCRE project was expanding access to college-level courses, which each of the schools did through the partnership with Columbus State. In addition to the Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered by schools, students could take college-level coursework through dual enrollment with Columbus State, taking a class either at one of the college's campuses, online, or at their high school. Schools increased the number of students taking dual-enrollment classes by building greater awareness of the opportunity, dedicating more counseling resources to getting students signed up to take the college's qualifying exam and assisting students with registering for Columbus State classes, developing students' college readiness, and providing extra support to students taking college courses.¹⁰ Some schools also had teachers qualify as adjunct faculty or facilitating instructors with Columbus State so that they could offer more dual-enrollment options on their own campus. Collectively, the number of dual-enrollment courses taken by students in CCRE schools more than doubled from the baseline year to Year 4 of the project, increasing from 2,149 to 5,213. Taking college-level courses sets high school students up for postsecondary success in a number of ways, and it also helps develop a future orientation by creating a college-going culture and raising the expectations for students. One teacher explained the impact of increased college course-taking on the school:

It's very rewarding and encouraging when you see your young people in your school doing well in these college courses, when you see them graduating with college credit and going on to college. I think that is something that was not happening when I first came to [this high school]. And I think it gives credence to what we're saying when we're saying, "Hey, we have to prepare them for college,"... because years ago, [this high school] had a low graduation rate, and the students weren't going to college. And so, it's easy to say, "Oh well these kids aren't going to do that." But when you see students doing it, I think it changes the mindset and it makes people rise up a little bit more.

Providing Supports for Postsecondary Plans

Finally, for the students who had a particular postsecondary path in mind, the schools, with the help of Columbus State Community College, provided a variety of supports to help them with the requisites, deadlines, and logistics of making the transition to their next step after high school. For students who were considering going to college, the schools offered advising on selecting prospective colleges, filling out college applications, and applying for financial aid and scholarships; preparation for standardized tests; and assistance with selecting a college to attend. In addition, I Know I Can advisors often also worked with students through the summer after graduation so that they got through the "last milestones" of requirements and arrangements needed to start college in the fall. Some of the schools also used instructional time to teach students skills needed for the transition to the professional working world. One year, the Reynoldsburg (HS)2 Academy offered a life skills class to seniors they called *Adulting*; among other things, it covered filling out job applications, creating a resume, and writing a cover letter, and had students do mock interviews. Whitehall Yearling High School began to implement career readiness and comprehensive college activities in daily grade-specific advisory periods. These advisory periods covered career readiness skills like applying for and landing a job, as well as soft skills expectations of the workplace. Time was also dedicated to investigating education requirements for careers, necessary college courses and degree options, and, in later grades, applying for college.

¹⁰ More detail on how schools expanded access to dual enrollment courses can be found in a separate brief on the topic at <https://earlycollegeresearch.uncg.edu/our-studies/>

Conclusion

From setting expectations for developing postsecondary plans, to helping students explore options and map out their pathway and timeline, to giving students opportunities to make progress on their pathway and assisting them with the details of transitioning to the next phase of their pathway, schools provided a variety of supports that helped launch students on their postsecondary journey. Developing and expanding these supports, in turn, cultivated a future orientation in their students and reinforced the future orientation of the schools. A staff member at Columbus State who worked on the project noticed the shift in perspective in some of the schools and described how they went from only focusing on graduation to saying, “We want our kids to graduate, but we also want them to look forward.”

The CCRE project suggests that when schools enhance their college and career readiness supports with the acknowledgement that all students need to plan and lay a foundation for their postsecondary life while still in high school, schools and students will develop a future orientation. Based on the experience of CCRE schools,

helping students plan for and transition to their next endeavor requires schools to engage students in the process throughout their time in high school. In addition, in order to adequately address the range of needs and interests of an entire student body, schools need to make use of a variety of resources alongside teachers and counselors, including third-party advisors, career planning programs or software, and higher education partners.

As high school graduates can no longer expect to build a prosperous future without postsecondary education or training, high schools cultivating a future-oriented culture and fostering a future orientation in their students is a necessity if they want to set students up for success in life. As one administrator at a CCRE school explained, “Everybody in our staff ... they really buy-in the idea that when a kid leaves here, they’re not done. There is an end goal for that student that involves hopes and dreams, and a productive life that provides a means. The reality is a high school diploma doesn’t achieve all that for the vast majority of people.”

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