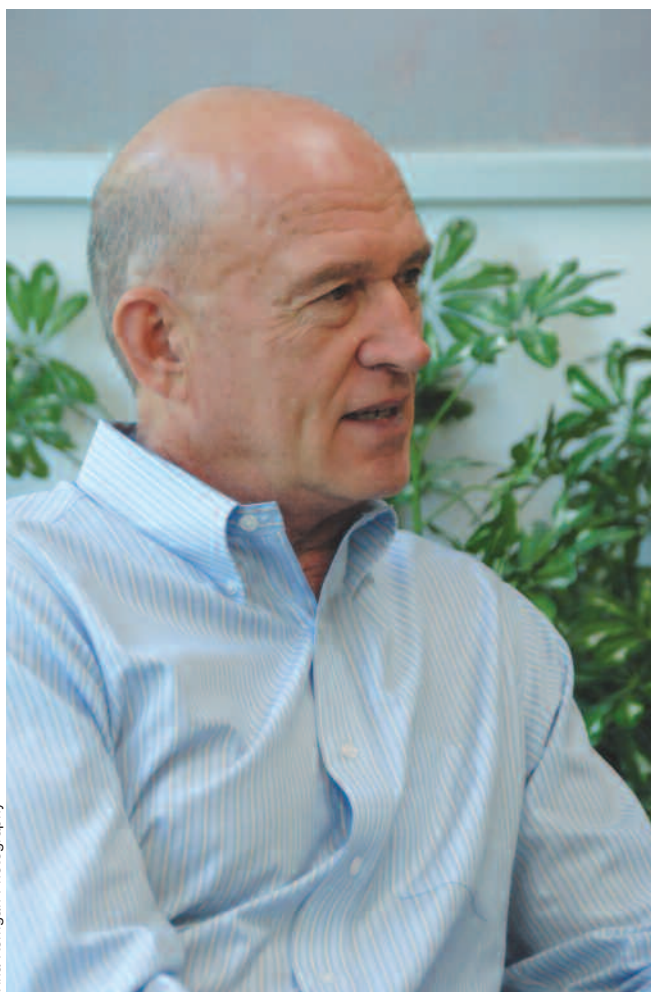


College Knowledge: An Interview with David Conley

Almost everything the U.S. is doing right now to connect students with college is probably necessary — but it's not sufficient if we want more students to be successful in college.



Tina Kerrigan Photography

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

KAPPAN: How did you come to be interested in college readiness?

CONLEY: It was a nonlinear journey with different pathways that converged. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I helped set up and run a couple of different public multicultural alternative schools and really learned a lot about the capabilities of students whom the system had identified as not being particularly able or successful. But when I worked with these kids, I realized what incredible talents they had. I came away from that with a belief that we needed higher expectations and higher aspirations for those students. But I didn't really know how to do that.

In those schools, you tend to wear a lot of hats, so I was both a teacher and an administrator. Discipline and attendance were the big focus and, in one school, that often meant going to kids' houses to find out why they weren't in school. That got me into their homes and their neighborhoods and really introduced me to the ecology of their lives. That influenced me powerfully.

In the 1980s, I held a number of administrative positions in school districts before I made the transition from being an assistant superintendent into higher education in 1989.

At that point, I had 20 years in public education on the K-12 side and a real feel for the issues and challenges there. When I went into higher education, the disconnect between those systems became really obvious and very striking to me.

Then, in Oregon, I started working on high school reform legislation, and I learned that the postsecondary system had not

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been a party to those discussions. Part of my work was trying to connect the high school reforms with college admissions. Oregon's mastery certificates assumed students would have high knowledge and skill levels. Why not align the certificates with college entrance skill levels and admit students who demonstrated the necessary proficiencies? This would theoretically give all students a clearer and more direct road to being college ready.

The tie back into my earlier experiences in alternative schools was that it was really obvious to me that the goal should not be just to prepare kids who already were going to go to college. But the goal should be to have more students end up going on to college by aligning what they did in high school with what they needed to be college ready. The goal was to get more kids ready. To do that, you had to have a system that was more transparent, that made it clearer what all kids had to do to be ready, but particularly those who hadn't seen themselves as "college material."

COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE

KAPPAN: You use the phrase "college knowledge" to describe what students need to know before they head to college. What do you mean by that phrase?

CONLEY: It means several things. First, it means having an understanding of the key content knowledge that prepares them for entry-level courses. Not every detail, necessarily, but the big ideas and core concepts. Second, and perhaps most important, they need a set of key cognitive strategies that allows them to apply in complex ways what they know and are learning. They must be able to select strategies to formulate a problem, conduct independent research, interpret conflicting explanations of a phenomenon, and express themselves appropriately in writing and speech. Third, they need to be able to manage themselves. This means setting goals, studying individually and in groups, managing their time, and being persistent with challenging tasks. Finally, they need to know everything involved with the process of selecting a college, applying, securing financial aid, and then getting along with professors and students with diverse opinions and backgrounds once they get there. These are the four major dimensions of college readiness. Students who master these have strong "college knowledge."

DISCONNECTING EDUCATION

KAPPAN: You argue that the disconnect between the K-12 system and the higher ed system is one of those structural issues that stymies many students

whose families don't have experience with a college education. In your book, *College Knowledge*, you almost seem to suggest that there was a deliberate decision to create two distinct systems that worked in isolation from each other.

CONLEY: I think it was essentially deliberate. In the U.S., we've never believed in a centralized education authority. Education was an exceedingly local event. It was funded locally. It was controlled locally. Teachers were hired locally. But there was also a strong belief that everyone should have a common education. Everyone should be educated so they could be a good citizen and able to read the Bible.

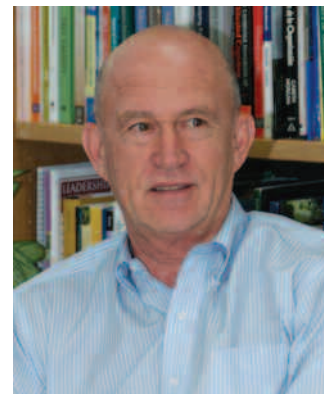
But postsecondary education was viewed as something that was for the mercantile classes or individuals who would go on to become lawyers or members of the clergy or one of a very few specialized areas that needed this advanced level of education. We never organized the governance of high schools or colleges into a system that connected the two deliberately because we never expected more than a handful of people to move from one system to the other.

KAPPAN: So, the rub in the United States really came when we ratcheted up the expectations about who should be attending college.

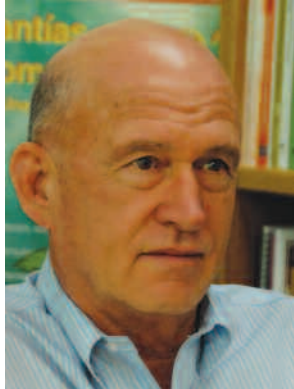
CONLEY: Absolutely. Until the early 1980s, almost no universities in this country were particularly selective, and only a relatively small percentage of high school graduates attended college. Now about two-thirds go on to some form of postsecondary learning pretty much immediately after high school, and about three-quarters do so within five years of graduating. That's an historic high point. That's a very significant portion of the graduating class.

KAPPAN: As you studied how high schools prepared students for college, what did you learn?

CONLEY: The typical high school doesn't explicitly focus on getting all students ready for postsecondary education. The schools that do make that their focus are unambiguous about their purpose. They don't entertain it as an option. They set it as the default outcome. They build into the school's



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BOOKS: *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
College Knowledge: What It Takes Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
Who Governs Our Schools? Changing Roles and Responsibilities. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.

DNA the activities and attitudes that are necessary for students to be on that track for college to be a viable option.

When schools have a high proportion of students who would be first-generation college students and who wouldn't have access to the "privileged knowledge" about how colleges operate, then schools have to provide that information. But this disconnect is so profound that even schools that are trying to focus on getting students ready for college are missing a lot of important information and activities.

TEACHERS' ROLE

KAPPAN: Teachers seem like a logical group of professionals that students might turn to for information about college preparation. In fact, you say that students believe that as well, but that teachers are often unprepared for these conversations and that schools and districts spend almost no time at all educating teachers for that important role.

CONLEY: It's striking that, a lot of the time, teachers aren't familiar with the requirements at the local university. They're not clear on the costs of attending. Each teacher tends to use his or her own personal college experience as a reference point. Most of them are unlikely to have ever talked with college instructors in their locale or vicinity. Most of them have not ever sat down and talked with a university professor about how each teaches their respective course, how they're similar and different in their standards, and whether they're aligned in their expectations for what students need to know to succeed in college courses.

A NEW VIEW OF STANDARDS

KAPPAN: Most states now have standards. What's the difference between the standards that states already have and the kind of standards that you're promoting?

CONLEY: I'm not sure I'm promoting any particular set of standards. The problem, however, with most existing state standards is that they don't explicitly connect with postsecondary education. They were written to identify a set of desirable knowledge and skills, mediated through a political process, and then influenced by what could be tested on the state test. I'm not saying they're bad standards. I'm not saying they don't cover worthy and worthwhile content, but they're not specifically aligned to prepare kids for postsecondary education. That becomes an "oh, by the way" — as in, "Oh, by the way, if you do learn these standards well, then we think you'll be ready for college."

What I worry about with a lot of the state stan-

dards is that they don't get to the point where they expect students to apply the information, integrate the information, retain the information, and develop deeper understandings of the knowledge the standards seek to represent and convey.

KAPPAN: Is the Common Core of State Standards going to change that?

CONLEY: My general sense is that the Common Core was formulated with the right goals in mind. It was formulated with the idea of where we want students to end up at the end of 12th grade. The standards have been designed to take into consideration the application of information in complex and higher-order settings and, to some degree, the progression of knowledge of a subject area across grade levels, not just the acquisition of skills.

From a development point of view, these standards probably started off with a better set of design criteria than the standards of the 1990s. (Note: Conley co-chaired the validation committee that judged the process by which the standards were developed. His research center is studying how well the Common Core of State Standards align with entry-level college courses by analyzing about 3,000 entry-level college courses in detail. He expects results out by January 2011.)

KAPPAN: How exactly would the Common Core contribute to resolving this disconnect between high school and college?

CONLEY: The standards can provide a more integrated framework for what secondary education ought to look like. If they can do that, then they can provide a platform for quality course development. We can't do that now. With these standards, we can think about the whole system and not just the pieces.

The problem with the 1990s approach to standards was that we did the standards first, then we did assessments more or less separately. We rarely did the curriculum piece, and we dared not talk about the instruction. In the end, none of the components necessarily connected very well, certainly not into an integrated whole, with rare exceptions.

When you look at a truly aligned system, all four of those things connect in an integrated way: what you teach, how you test it, what's the best curriculum to achieve that, and what are the best methods to teach it. If we wanted an integrated system, we would not be afraid to talk

about how to do this. It seems as if we fear that talking about an integrated system of standards, assessments, curriculum, and instruction is tantamount to accepting loss of local control. Hopefully, the Common Core can create the basis for an ongoing public forum and dialogue where we can share and learn from each other about how best to teach the most important concepts and the most important skills. If we can get some agreement there, then we can get at the improvement of instruction.

KAPPAN: Do you have any concerns about the Common Core?

CONLEY: I guess I am concerned about several things. If the standards just get locked into place without the ability to revise, adapt, upgrade, and improve them regularly, we won't be much better off than we are now. The challenge here is that the standards will develop tremen-

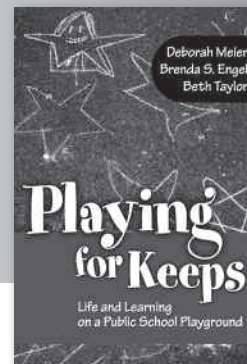
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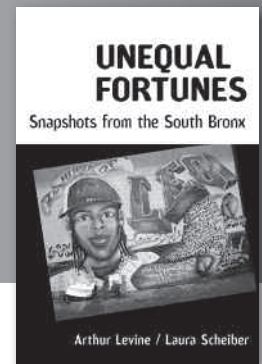
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dous institutional inertia; it will become much harder to make changes once everyone adjusts their

curriculum and materials to them. We really have to maintain enough flexibility to revisit and update them regularly based on the real educational needs of students, with an eye constantly toward the future world and society in which students will live.

I'm concerned that we not turn the standards into an impediment to students progressing through the education system and attending college. The standards are a framework for defining expectations, but not all students will be ready to meet all of them in the same way at the same time. How can we ensure that students who still need to grow and improve in some areas are still able to pursue postsecondary learning in areas where they're ready to do so? Hopefully, the standards won't be

turned into some sort of checklist, and the only students who can go to college are those who can check off every item on the list.

POLICY CHANGES

KAPPAN: If you want to move to a system that ensures that schools are preparing students who are ready to be successful in college and not just eligible for college, then everybody has to contribute to create that system. So, walk me through the process. What would various stakeholders have to contribute in order to change the system in the way that you propose?

CONLEY: There are too many things to list them all. But, if we're going to hold schools accountable for getting kids ready for college, then policy makers could have schools report on a variety of measures, not just the number of students who go to college. For example, within their states, policy makers can look at the success of students in certain entry-level courses, such as composition or an entry-level math course. They can look at the proportion of students who end up in remedial placements. That will help them measure the disconnect between what's being taught in high schools and what's expected in college.

Beyond that, policy makers could facilitate the communication between high schools and colleges. In South Carolina, for example, our research center is field-testing a program where high school teachers and college instructors sit down and design their courses together so that the last course a student takes in high school and the first course he or she takes in college would complement each other.

In short, policy makers would need to be more explicit about the definition of success as it relates to being ready for college and careers, and then be willing to identify key data points that are more varied and wide ranging than we currently use. Educators at all levels of the system would need to be ready to work more directly and collaboratively to clarify their expectations for students and of one another, and then plan how to align their efforts so that the sum of an education was greater than all of the individual parts.

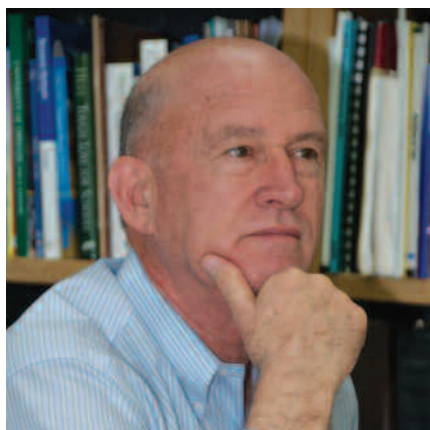
KAPPAN: In quite a few states, policy makers have decided that students have to pass an exit exam before they receive a diploma. Are exit exams aggravating the situation or improving it?

CONLEY: Exit exams are problematic if they're directing teacher and student energy toward a type of learning that doesn't connect with college readiness. Those exams typically shy away from measuring or requiring anything that might be difficult to measure but nevertheless important, such as a term paper, or a research project, or a lab-based experiment, or a critique of a source document — in other words, anything that is really going to demonstrate that the student learned the information, understands the concepts, connects the ideas, and then applies them in an appropriate fashion. Students are capable of going further and deeper than what we can learn from tests, but we're not comfortable measuring these things, and we're not always comfortable teaching them as well. The necessary caution of states as they develop exams can inadvertently cause them to fall short of the goals that the states truly have for their students.

ROLE OF SCHOOLS

KAPPAN: Every time I embark on a conversation about standards, I seem to run headlong into the debate about whether the role of schools in America is to prepare students to be citizens in a democracy or whether it's to prepare them for jobs and college. There seems to be a conflict and a tension between those ideas. Do you perceive that sort of tension?

CONLEY: I absolutely perceive it, although I find it a little surprising. We talk about college and career readiness because we think there's a core set of



In a truly aligned system, four things connect in an integrated way: what you teach, how you test it, what's the best curriculum to achieve that, and what are the best methods to teach it.

academic capabilities that everyone needs. Everyone may not go on to college, but everyone is clearly going to have to continue learning for their entire careers.

4 Essentials of College Knowledge

1. Content knowledge that prepares them for entry-level courses
2. Cognitive strategies that enable them to apply what they know and what they are learning
3. Ability to manage themselves (e.g. goal setting, time management, being persistent)
4. College application and selection process

For example, I looked at a welding program at a community college and at the skill set needed to get an associate's certificate in welding. Well, you have to possess a reasonably strong science background, understand different chemical reactions and a lot about metals and metallurgy, have a good vocabulary, be able to read and understand complex texts and materials, be able to interpret plans and designs, as well as being able to manage your time well and study effectively. Weld-

ing is not that different from a lot of technical certificates.

When you deconstruct almost any of these technical training programs, you find an academic core. So my rationale is fairly simple: If everyone needs a pretty strong set of academic knowledge and skills anyway, then why would we want to distinguish the education that we give young people? Is there or should there really be an educational program for students who think they want to get a job right out

of high school? What would that look like? Most of those jobs don't even expect the knowledge and skill level required in a typical high school program. Why not just give up the need to sort kids and instead equip all of them with the tools to continue to learn beyond high school? It's almost a certainty that they'll need to be in some sort of formal learning environment again at some point in their lives, so why not be sure they can succeed then?

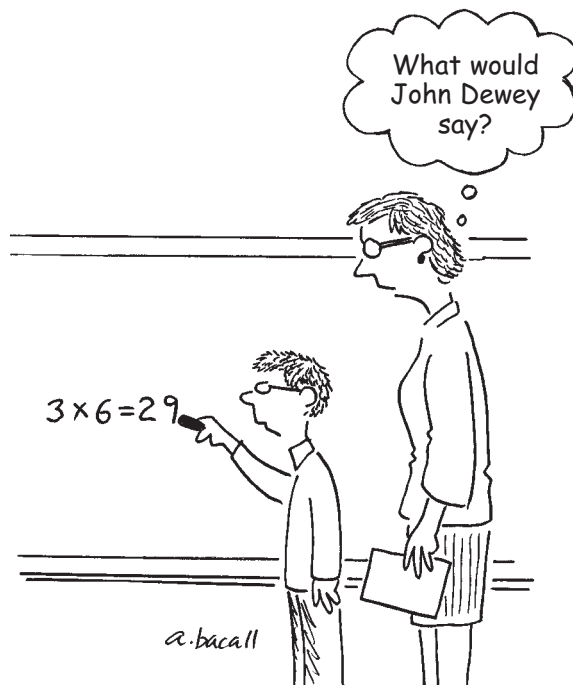
In the high school curriculum, teaching literature and writing and history and science can be done in a way that enlightens students about the structure of knowledge in those disciplines and about how one learns in those disciplines — and, by extension, how one learns in other areas that may be quite different. Helping students understand what it means to think like an expert in one of those disciplines teaches them what it takes to become expert in any area. You do that at the same time that you prepare all students to learn beyond high school. I don't see any conflict at all between those two.

OVERHAULING THE SYSTEM

KAPPAN: What you're envisioning is not merely tweaking the system toward improvement. You have a much broader vision of how the structure of education ought to change.

CONLEY: What I'm really talking about here is an overhaul of the system top to bottom. Almost everything we're doing right now to connect students with college is probably necessary, but it's not sufficient. We're not giving the right kinds of tests. We're not delving deeply enough into the disciplines to help students understand them well enough to retain what they're taught. We're not using much of what the cognitive sciences tell us about how people gain and organize information. We don't really organize teaching and learning so that it gets at deeper levels of understanding and stronger retention of disciplinary knowledge and key cognitive strategies.

We can't really afford to sort people into those who have access to privileged knowledge and so find it relatively easy to go on to college and those who might be first-generation college students and don't have easy access to that knowledge. Those students are not being given the same opportunities. Whether we believe education is entirely for one's personal growth and development or whether we believe it's a means to an end, this country as a whole probably can't survive in the form we know if we don't ensure that post-secondary access and success are attainable now by students who would be the first in their families to attend college, and not something that takes those children and their families generations to achieve. **K**



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