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A Crash Course in College Preparedness

Start sharpening your analytical skills early and don't shy from a challenging read.

By Carol Frey

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If colleges could shine a light inside the brains of high school students, they would be looking for synapses well prepared to grapple with math, science, and literature. But all too often today, what colleges would see would disappoint them.

Many students are arriving on campus with few tools to succeed. Of the high school students in the class of 2009 who took the ACT test, for example, fewer than one quarter met each of the benchmarks for college readiness in math, science, English, and reading. Just over a quarter met none of them.

In a 10-year study of students, those who did meet the benchmarks had higher college grade point averages, completed their freshman courses, and had a significantly greater chance of graduating, according to Cynthia Schmeiser, president of ACT's education division. Those who didn't meet the benchmarks fared worse on all counts. "The colleges receiving the most applications can afford to be more selective, and readiness isn't a predominant issue," Schmeiser says. "It's the less selective schools that are confronting the readiness problem."

Even those B students who take all the college prep courses required for high school graduation can end up on campus in need of remedial classes in reading, writing, math, or all three, says David Spence, president of the Southern Regional Education Board. The problem, says Spence, is that college professors expect students to have more analytical skills than fact-heavy high school courses provide.

What's more, educators don't agree on how high school classes should be taught differently. "We have to get higher education to speak with one voice on standards," says Spence, who collaborated with the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education on a new report that calls for state standards of college readiness. Indeed, a coalition of 48

states is working on a nationwide set of core curriculum standards, and the Obama administration's Blueprint for Education Reform advocates the dramatic new goal of requiring that all high school graduates by the year 2020 be "college and career ready."

But educators do agree on the courses that students should take in high school: four years of English at the college-preparation level; four years of science including two lab sciences; four years of social sciences such as history and economics; and, increasingly, four years of math. "If you take a year off from math, when you take your college math placement exam, you could find yourself in a remedial class that doesn't qualify for financial aid or count toward graduation," warns Jacqueline King, who directs the American Council on Education's Center for Policy Analysis.

To be ready for the college-level algebra required of most freshmen, for example, means taking algebra I and II courses and trigonometry in high school. A statistics class, besides being good math practice, can help with the study of social sciences, says Robert R. Neuman, former associate dean for academic development at Marquette University. Students who skip math in their senior year will need to brush up. Take a summer math course for practice at a community college, suggests King, or do the readings and homework assignments for a free online math course such as those on MIT's OpenCourseWare website.

Even in the right college prep classes, today's students may need to push themselves to develop critical-thinking skills. Work on reading and understanding—early and often, experts advise. There will be more reading in college, and more complicated reading, than you might expect. A growing worry of educators over the past few years is that high school students aren't practiced enough at interpreting and drawing conclusions as they study complex texts. When college professors and employers were surveyed a few years ago by the policy research group Achieve about how well prepared high school graduates are for college and work, 70 percent of professors (and 41 percent of employers) said students' inability to read and understand complicated material is a serious deficiency.

Gaining that ability requires reading lots of tough material, right through senior slump time and over the summer. "Colleges' lists of must-read books are remarkably similar," says Mark Conley, an associate professor of teacher education at Michigan State University and president of the Michigan Alliance of Reading Professors. "Check it out for your

school." Or choose from the nonfiction bestseller list in the *New York Times*, King suggests, and read books on public policy or history.

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