

COMMENTARY

Measuring Career Readiness

AUTHOR

[David N. Plank](#) | Stanford University

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The current rhetorical convention to describe what we want students to know and be able to do asserts that students should leave high school “ready for college and careers.” There is some agreement about what it means to be ready for college (see [here](#) and [here](#)) but far less about what it means to be ready for careers, and little or none about how career readiness should be measured. This is a problem in itself, but it is also symptomatic of a more fundamental disagreement that lies behind much of the policy discussion about assessment.

This disagreement can be illustrated with a story. In the early years of the Bush administration a colleague of mine gave a talk in Washington in which he painstakingly explained why “a test is not a test is not a test.” Some tests are norm-referenced, and some are criterion-referenced. Some are formative, and some are summative. And so on. When he concluded his talk a senior administration official thanked him for his presentation and stated that for the Bush administration “a test is a test is a test.”

The critical question in assessment policy is how much information we need to evaluate students’ readiness for productive adult lives, and of what kinds? From one point of view we want assessments to produce as much information as possible, in order to evaluate students’ strengths and weaknesses, to identify gaps in their knowledge and understanding, and to honor differences in their talents and interests. From another point of view, though, we just need a test (“is a test is a test”) that sorts students out along a performance continuum and recognizes those who surpass a fixed standard of “proficiency” in a designated subject matter or two.

The latter perspective radically simplifies the task of assessment, in two different ways. First, it asserts implicitly or explicitly that college and career readiness are the same thing; and second, it adopts student performance on standardized assessments in math and English as a sufficient measure of readiness. As a practical matter, this means that for nearly all students their performance in mathematics (and in California this means Algebra II) is the determining criterion of their readiness for college and careers

This remains the prevailing view in assessment policy, and shifting it will require critics to demonstrate that the value of additional information about students’ knowledge and skills (both academic and otherwise) in determining their readiness for college and careers justifies the cost of more complex and comprehensive assessments. This will not be an easy case to make.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education

520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444

Stanford, CA 94305

Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

