

**November 12, 2009** **Pathways to College: Next Steps for Nevada**

Presented by the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd, in partnership with the Nevada System of Higher Education and Nevada Department of Education

Las Vegas, Nevada

Nearly 100 staff from the Nevada System of Higher Education, Nevada Department of Education, seven of Nevada's postsecondary institutions, and the state's K–12 school districts joined business and community leaders in Las Vegas on November 12, 2009 to expand their knowledge of evidence-based strategies for increasing access to higher education for all students. Sponsored by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd, in partnership with the Nevada System of Higher Education and Nevada Department of Education, the one-day event was part of a U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES) initiative to bridge research, policy, and practice by providing key Nevada education stakeholders an opportunity to hear from experts, learn from one another's experiences, and consider how to apply these evidence-based strategies to the state's context.

### **Background**

For more than a decade, Nevada educators have recognized the importance of developing college and workforce readiness standards. During its 75th session in 2009, the Nevada State Legislature signaled that it was time to move forward by requesting that the Nevada System of Higher Education and Nevada Department of Education recommend college and workforce readiness standards for adoption. To that end, the Chancellor and Superintendent of Public Instruction convened a task force charged with developing the standards. To provide key stakeholder input to the work of the task force, a group of nearly 100 K–16 educators and business leaders from across the state met to learn about the five evidence-based recommendations in the recently released practice guide, *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do*, one in a series of research-based practice guides published by IES's What Works Clearinghouse, and to apply those recommendations to the Nevada context.

In addition to learning about research findings, participants heard from a panel of experts from other states involved in creating college readiness standards and the processes for developing and

implementing them, as well as some lessons learned that might apply to Nevada's efforts. Participants engaged in discussions about what could strengthen state policy and practice in higher education, K–12 education, and workforce readiness.

### **Presentations**

Two presentations provided participants with information about IES-sponsored research and resources targeted at increasing access to higher education for all students.

A short DVD presentation provided an introduction to IES practice guides, each of which offers evidence-based recommendations for addressing a current education challenge. Each guide is developed by an expert panel of researchers that has examined strategies for addressing the issue and practitioners who have had related experience in their district or school. For each recommendation, a guide presents specific implementation steps, an assessment of the strength of the supporting evidence, and solutions to common roadblocks.

Based on the expert panel's review of current research on the given issue in a practice guide, the relative strength of the evidence for each recommendation is categorized as strong, moderate, or low.

Evidence is ranked as:

- » **strong** if the recommendation is based on rigorous research and the panel has a high degree of confidence that the practice is effective;
- » **moderate** if there is some research to suggest that the practice is effective, but there is also some question about whether the research has effectively controlled for other explanations or whether the practice would be effective in most or all contexts; or
- » **low** if the practice has not been shown to be effective through rigorous research, but there is some compelling evidence that the practice works and the expert panel thinks it is an important recommendation. A low level of evidence does not mean that the recommendation is less important than recommendations with a strong or moderate rating. It may mean that a rigorous, experimental study of the practice would be difficult, that researchers have not yet studied it, or that there is weak or conflicting evidence of effectiveness.

Dr. William Tierney, professor of higher education and Director of the Center for Higher Education Policy at the University of Southern California, and panel chair for the featured practice guide, gave an overview of *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do*. His presentation primarily focused on this guide's five recommendations, what he referred to as the *known knowns* based upon vetted research. They are:

**1. (a) Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work, and (b) ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by 9th grade.**

The courses students take in high school have important consequences for their academic preparation and access to college. High schools must offer courses that prepare students academically for college-level work as well as advise students to take them.

**2. Utilize assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college, and assist them in overcoming deficiencies as they are identified.**

The completion of courses needed to graduate from high school and meet college entry requirements does not guarantee student success in college. High schools must assess student progress to identify, notify, and assist students who are not adequately prepared as early as possible.

**3. Surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations.**

The formation of college-going peer groups and social networks encourages college attendance. Adult mentors can serve as role models, assist with the college entry process, monitor academic progress, and offer advice.

**4. Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry.**

High schools should provide individual assistance to students taking college admissions tests, searching for colleges, submitting college applications, and selecting a college.

**5. Increase families' financial awareness, and help students apply for financial aid.**

High schools can ensure that students take the necessary steps to obtain financial aid by educating students and their parents early in high school about college affordability and the availability of financial aid and by helping them identify potential sources of aid.

Tierney's presentation also acknowledged issues related to navigating paths to college in which the evidence base is not developed enough to support specific recommendations. By way of examples, he mentioned *unknown knowns* such as how to prepare students for the social and cultural challenges of college and *known unknowns* such as the ways in which technology is transforming education. Lastly, he referred to what we don't know as *unknown unknowns*, which he framed as a call to innovate and investigate new ways to prepare students for postsecondary success.

**Applying Research to Practice**

A panel of experts with experience leading state efforts to develop college and workforce readiness standards discussed ways in which the content of the practice guide can further inform Nevada's effort to set standards. The panelists were Dr. Sue Cain, Eastern Kentucky University; Dr. David Conley, University of Oregon; and Dr. Amaury Nora, University of Texas-San Antonio. Panelists' remarks were guided by three broad questions from the moderator:

- » *What were the key events in your states that allowed for college readiness standards to emerge? Who was involved, how long did it take, and what was the process for moving to formalize the standards?*
- » *How have your states navigated the development of college readiness and workforce readiness standards in the same conversation?*
- » *Somewhere between high school preparation and college readiness is a policy and practical concern about remediation in basic skills at the postsecondary level. How have your states dealt with the need for developmental courses in college?*

The panelists opened their remarks with the observation that Nevada has an opportunity to avoid replicating a key mistake made in other states, and advised it to include all stakeholder groups—including K–12 education, higher education, business, parents, and policymakers—in the development and implementation of standards from the start. In particular, “getting all pieces and parts” of the K–12 and higher education systems to work together rather than in “separate silos” was seen as especially challenging.

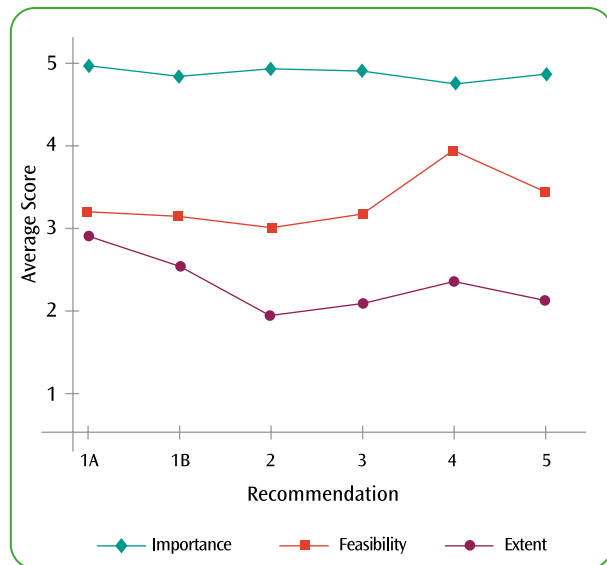
Panelists described the standards development process as taking many years and requiring “connecting a lot of dots” both in the adoption of standards through regulatory and legislative structures as well as in practice, especially the difficult task of sequencing the high school curriculum to vertically align with college course work. Panelists offered suggestions about how this can be accomplished: One was South Carolina’s pairing of teachers at feeder high schools with faculty at the few colleges that the majority of students attend, to jointly design courses that bridge both systems; another was Kentucky’s effort to inform high school curriculum by temporarily reassigning high school teachers to teach courses at two-and four-year colleges.

Panelists also commented on trying to reconcile different opinions about equating college and workforce readiness standards. While there is agreement that all students should be prepared for what comes after high school, the panelists acknowledged that opinions among stakeholders vary as to whether curricular standards and required courses should be the same to prepare students for college and the workforce. Lastly, there was considerable discussion about remediation. Panelists described approaches to avert the need for postsecondary remediation, such as a pilot effort in Kentucky that offers high school seniors open entry/open exit, self-paced remediation classes that, if passed, grant them admission to any of the state’s public higher education institutions. One panelist even suggested a new paradigm that would normalize remediation in college since “all students fall short in one way or another” and can benefit from support services.

### Interactive Sessions

Following the presentations, participants worked in table groups to assess each of the five recommendations in the practice guide by their *importance* to the Nevada context, the *extent* to which each one is currently implemented in the state, and the *feasibility* of full implementation for each, given other K–16 priorities and currently available resources. The results are displayed in the graph. In summary, using a five-point scale (1=low and 5=high), the participants consistently ranked each of the recommendations as *important* to increasing access to higher education for all students (4.8). However, they ranked the *extent* to which the recommendations were in place throughout the state the lowest (2.3) and the *feasibility* of achieving implementation (3.4) in between *importance* and *extent*, suggesting considerable work remains if the state intends to carry out the suggested practices.

To provide direct input to the task force, participants also worked in table groups to suggest ideas for further developing



standards and applying the practice guide recommendations to move the process forward. Their suggestions included:

1. Set high and achievable standards with clear goals.
2. Apply all of the recommendations of the practice guide but start with Recommendation 1: Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work, and ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by 9th grade.
3. Involve P–16 stakeholders and content experts in developing standards.
4. Evaluate the standards adopted by other states and assess their relevance to the Nevada context.
5. Align the content of high school exit standards with college entry standards.
6. Define college readiness and workforce readiness and determine if they are the same or different.

### Conclusions

The Nevada System of Higher Education and Nevada Department of Education concluded the event with a declaration that “now is the time to take action and move forward!” Five concluding takeaways from the event are:

#### 1. Nevada does not have a college-going culture – yet.

The event helped to validate some practices that were already in place and identified the need to revise or jumpstart others to prepare all students for postsecondary success. It encouraged participants to examine the research on increasing access to college and to carefully consider ways to implement the practice guide recommendations. “There is research to help us chart a better pathway to college,” explained a state education leader,

who added that some immediate next steps should include ensuring that all high schools offer a college-preparatory curriculum, provide mentoring for students, and assist students and parents with college and financial aid applications.

## **2. Students need both content and college knowledge to be successful.**

At the K–12 and postsecondary levels there was an acknowledgement that taking college-preparatory courses in high school and achieving the GPA required for college admission are not sufficient for college success. There are other types of knowledge and skills that students should be developing to prepare for entry-level college work. As Nevada develops its college and workforce readiness standards, participants were also encouraged to pay attention to developing *college knowledge* such as critical and analytic thinking, skilled interpretive writing, and ways to manage multiple and competing assignments.

## **3. Nevada does not have to reinvent the wheel.**

Based on the experiences of states such as Kentucky, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas, participants heard from a panel of expert educators and scholars about the promises and pitfalls of developing and implementing college and workforce readiness standards. Of particular interest were strategies other states use to engage stakeholders in setting common standards and college readiness goals and practices that reduce the need for students to take developmental courses in college.

## **4. College and workforce readiness standards should correspond.**

While the event intentionally focused on the practice guide recommendations to increase access to college for all students, participants raised the need to align high school exit standards with consistent postsecondary and workforce entry standards. What Nevada is aiming for, explained a state education leader, “is to prepare students for meaningful and productive lives after high school,” which entails rigorous training to succeed in college credit-bearing courses and the lifelong learning necessary to succeed in jobs.

## **5. All stakeholder groups must contribute to the development of college and workforce readiness standards.**

The event launched a statewide effort to develop college and workforce readiness standards by drawing expertise “from across the many” to guide and inform the newly formed task force. This 15-member task force, jointly appointed by the Nevada System of Higher Education and Nevada Department of Education, is charged with developing college and workforce readiness standards to recommend for adoption by the Nevada Board of Regents and Nevada State Board of Education. Participants expressed concern about the small number of stakeholders on the task force leading the standards development process, but were

reassured by the Chancellor and Superintendent of Public Instruction that there would be multiple opportunities for all stakeholder groups to contribute.

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Over the next months, the task force will continue to prepare college and workforce readiness standards to recommend to the Nevada Board of Regents and Nevada State Board of Education. The aim is to incorporate these recommendations into policy and regulation before the Nevada State Legislature convenes its 76th session in 2011. Additional REL West technical assistance is being planned to continue to bring research evidence to practice to support Nevada’s efforts to accomplish the difficult task of developing state college and workforce readiness standards.

## **Resources**

- » *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do* and other practice guides may be downloaded from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>
- » The What Works Clearinghouse website may be accessed at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>
- » The REL West at WestEd website may be accessed at <http://relwest.wested.org>
- » The Nevada Department of Education website may be accessed at <http://www.doe.nv.gov>

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