It’s a mystery. Why do some students who seem to have strong college aspirations rarely complete homework or arrive prepared for class? Why do bright students fail to show up for internships and other programs meant to engage students like them? Why do some students who excelled in a college access or enrichment program drop out of college or never pursue the kinds of jobs they prepared for? Students themselves offer clues to this mystery, and by using the right lens, thoughtful educators can be good detectives and find the solution.

Psychology, sociology, and neuroscience provide the basis for a lens that we call the developmental approach to college and career readiness. A developmental approach acknowledges that many social, emotional, and cognitive factors shape college and career paths. Where students are in their development—for example, how they understand their identities and how skilled they are at planning—shapes how they behave and whether they succeed. Identity, motivation, self-regulation, and relationships are central to the developmental processes that influence postsecondary success. But these developmental processes—the clues to the mystery behind students’ actions—sometimes go unnoticed.

Here we focus on two developmental processes: forming identity and developing motivation. How do these processes influence college and career readiness among middle and high school students, and how can educators support students as they develop? These strategies can provide a starting place for educators that they can build on over time by attending to other developmental processes, such as developing self-regulation and forming peer relationships.

Students who have high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to take the steps necessary to reach their goals.

A Developmental Approach in Practice

A developmental approach to college and career is not a prescriptive set of activities, but rather a way of seeing students and interacting with them. Because no two students develop at the same rate, some students need different kinds of supports than others, and educators must see students as individuals and differentiate their efforts accordingly.

Even though each student develops differently, it is common for students to navigate certain developmental tasks and transitions at similar ages. For example, middle and high school students tend to be very engaged in identity development. Students at these ages are also influenced by the motivation and self-regulatory processes that begin earlier in life but are especially central to planning for college and
careers. All of these processes influence adolescents’ aspirations and choices.

Anyone who works with young people—school leaders, teachers, school counselors, and community partners—can apply their understanding of human development as they guide students in making choices about the future. Advisory periods, after-school programs, college-access programs, and academic classes are all opportunities. Our efforts are most successful when they are coordinated, with the entire school community committed to addressing students’ developmental needs.

Supporting Identity Development
Many educators who focus on college pathways talk about the importance of helping students develop a “college-going identity” or see themselves as college students. The strategies these educators tend to use are short-term and focused on modeling. For example, many schools host a College Day, during which faculty and staff wear college sweatshirts and hang pennants in the hallways. But the development of a college-going identity—like the more general process of identity development—happens over time and through many influences. For students, particularly low-income and other underserved students, being reminded that educators have high expectations is not enough. They need to integrate “college-goer” into their most fundamental understanding of who they are.

One factor that influences students’ future-oriented identities is whether they believe that people like them pursue certain paths. To believe that college or careers are possible and desirable, students need to see how college-going or a successful career can coexist with other facets of their identities, even when those facets seem at first to run counter to such a future.

For example, we have known many students from immigrant families who believed that they couldn’t be college students because they wanted to remain dedicated to helping their families after high school. These students had few opportunities to see that these goals don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Similarly, studies have shown that identity...
conflicts are common among first-generation students who feel torn between family roles and education advancement (London, 1989).

Such conflicts tend to be particularly pronounced for students who do not have models of how others in their shoes have maintained core elements of their identities and become college graduates. Educators can support these students by introducing them to such role models. One strategy is for schools to introduce current students to alumni who share their backgrounds and who have graduated from college. One school we know routinely brings local college students from specific campus-based groups (Asian club, Latino student group, gay and lesbian student group) to speak with the parallel high school group. In such activities, the elements of identity that the high school students and graduates share create bonds that can make the messages about college easier to hear and believe.

These strategies are most beneficial when students have a healthy awareness of who they are and what is important to them. Students who feel confident about their abilities are more likely to see themselves as “college material” or as qualified for certain jobs. They are then more likely to set high goals. And students who have high levels of self-efficacy—that is, those who believe they can achieve the goals they set—are more likely to take the steps necessary to reach their goals. In contrast, a student who dreams of being an architect but doesn’t feel smart enough may say, “What’s the point?” when encouraged by a counselor to join a college-preparation program.

Schools, where students spend a large percentage of their time, rarely provide time or space for students to explore and discuss identity. As a result, educators sometimes miss opportunities to realize that students don’t identify with certain college or career pathways—and to do something to alter those perceptions. So what can educators do to help students develop an identity that includes college and career success? Here are a few ideas:

- **Encourage staff to discuss identity in the classroom.** Teachers might use discussions about characters from a novel or public figures involved in current events to initiate a larger conversation about identity, including the many ways students define themselves. Teachers can also create writing assignments or journaling opportunities in which students reflect on aspects of their identities. During classroom visits, school counselors might invite students to consider how they might develop goals from personal interests and identities.

- **Create opportunities for students to build skills in a range of areas.** Students need structured time with supportive adults to explore their strengths in academics, arts, sports, and technology. Some schools use extended learning time blocks, internship programs, elective periods, and after-school programs to provide students with experiences in areas not covered by the traditional curriculum. These activities can build students’ self-efficacy, and students are often able to transfer that sense of self-efficacy to other areas, including college and career preparation. Teachers, coaches, visiting artists, and other adults should ensure that these opportunities include time for students to reflect on newfound talents and strengths and on how they could continue to pursue these activities in the future.

- **Be mindful of practices and policies that undermine the development of self-efficacy.** Adults can subtly undermine students’ belief in themselves by not assigning challenging tasks, offering unsolicited help, or doing things for students rather than allowing them to master a skill. For example, college-preparatory advisors should not complete applications or forms for students; instead, they should help them manage the process. They might teach them time-management skills and give them spreadsheets and other tools to track their application materials.

### Supporting Student Motivation

Contrary to popular belief, motivation is not a binary quality—something that students either have or don’t have. Motivation is a cyclical process involving the kinds of goals people set, the reasons they set them, and the actions they take to achieve them. In fact, the reasons students aim for college or specific careers matter almost as much as the intended outcomes, especially when it comes to staying the course in the face of challenges.

Earning a comfortable salary is a common reason for pursuing college or a specific career. Many educators encourage students to aim for college by showing them a chart depicting salary differentials by education level. Conversations about such extrinsic rewards...
can be a good starting place, but this information alone will probably not be enough to help students stay focused over the long haul.

Research shows that when students’ goals are driven by more intrinsic rewards, students are ultimately more likely to succeed (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When students enjoy a task, they are more likely to stay engaged in the face of difficulty. In contrast, when students’ goals are driven solely by extrinsic rewards, they tend to give up more easily and are therefore less likely to succeed in the long term, even if they perform well in the short term. When the reward feels too distant, they don’t have enough reason to stay engaged.

When discussions of extrinsic rewards are accompanied by conversations that help students identify the intrinsic benefits of certain career paths, the combination can be powerful. Try these strategies to balance extrinsic and intrinsic motivation:

- Make sure that students hear a range of reasons for going to college and choosing certain careers. These benefits should include such intrinsic reasons as finding interesting work, meeting others with similar interests, and making a contribution to the community. School leaders and guidance counselors can highlight these reasons in materials they hand out to students, on bulletin boards, and by asking guest speakers to emphasize them in addition to financial and other extrinsic rewards. We have also helped students analyze and discuss newspaper articles and speeches that included these themes. A teacher might ask a class to design an ideal community and then invite them to consider the careers that support their newly designed communities.

- In instructional settings, emphasize learning rather than test scores and grades. When teachers conduct test preparation, administer tests, and hand them back, they should ensure that students understand the material thoroughly and deeply and are not focused on just getting a certain score, an extrinsic reward. Teachers should also stress the real-world relevance of academic content, build on students’ interests whenever possible, and follow other practices for fostering student engagement.

- Provide students with effort-oriented feedback. When students believe that effort (as opposed to innate ability) leads to success, they are more likely to set the kinds of goals that will make them successful in the long term. Starting at an early age, teachers should stress that the harder students work, the more likely they are to succeed. Too often, our praise sends subtle messages that success is the result of ability, when we say things like, “Wow, you must be really smart because you got 100 percent on the math test!” or “You’re a great athlete!” Students are more likely to believe in the role of effort when they frequently hear adults say things like, “Great job on that book report. You must have worked really hard!” and “Wow, all that practice really paid off in today’s game!”

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Becoming a Developmentally Aware Educator

Research on adolescent development suggests many other activities that education leaders and practitioners can use to harness the power of identity and motivation, as well as self-regulation, peer relationships, and family support. Using a developmental approach is often as much about how teachers approach their work as about what they do. This approach should influence how educators interact with students during instructional time, extracurricular activities, and special events, as well as during activities focused on college and career. College and career paths are shaped even by the way that administrators structure schedules (for example, to allow for enrichment activities) and by how teachers help students prepare for and interpret test results (to emphasize effort and learning).

A developmental approach doesn’t necessarily require more resources, but it does require continuity and long-term commitment. By thinking broadly and deeply about how development shapes thoughts and behaviors, educators can support students at all stages of the postsecondary planning process, from decision making to planning to long-term persistence. They can ensure that all youth are prepared for choosing and succeeding in all steps of all of the pathways available to them.

References


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