

‘COLLEGE & CAREER’: HOW EDUCATION CONFUSED THE ‘MEANS’ WITH THE ‘END’

AN ARTICLE SERIES

ARTICLE 4

Have you ever met someone who retired from college?

I like to ask that question when people throw around the phrase “College and Career Ready.” It usually gets a laugh, but it makes the point: no student retires from college. You retire from a career. ***College is not the destination. It’s a path. It’s a means to an end.*** And yet, somehow, we’ve enshrined the phrase “College and Career Ready” as if the two are equal options on the same plane of importance. They’re not.

At best, the phrase is a well-meaning but clumsy attempt to validate multiple postsecondary paths. At worst, it’s a slogan that still tilts the scale toward college while making ‘career’ sound like the backup plan. Either way, it’s a false dichotomy—and one that carries real consequences for how we prepare young people for life.



How We Got Here

Education is never short on buzzwords. “College and Career Ready” came into vogue in the early 2000s, gaining traction with policymakers, state departments of education, and national initiatives. On paper, it was supposed to signal equity: no matter what students chose, schools would prepare them equally well for both college and career.

But listen closely and you’ll hear the subtext. When schools say “College and Career Ready,” what they often mean is: we’ll push ‘college’ as the gold standard, but we’ll politely nod to ‘career’ to keep the trades, apprenticeships, and workforce advocates quiet.

That subtext matters. Because in trying to please everyone, we end up reinforcing the same hierarchy that got us here: college first, career second.

My Problem with the “College” part of this moniker

Let’s be blunt: college is not an end goal. It is a tool—a means to an end, to a career! For some careers, it’s an essential tool. Doctors, engineers, architects, teachers—these fields require an academic degree. But for many careers, college is optional, inefficient, or even unnecessary.

By putting ‘college’ side by side with ‘career’, we imply they’re parallel destinations. But college is not a destination—it’s a bridge. Imagine if we advertised airports as the ultimate vacation spot. That is nonsensical! Nobody vacations to Terminal B, Gate 17. The airport is a step in the journey to the vacation, but not the vacation itself. College is the same.



The Expensive Laboratory

Here’s the problem with pretending college is the default path: it becomes the “laboratory” where students are told to “figure it out.” But this is no cheap lab experiment. The average student debt in the U.S. hovers around \$30,000, and for many, it’s far higher. Students are encouraged to pay tuition just to “discover themselves.” That’s not discovery. ***That’s gambling—and often with borrowed money.***



But what if we flipped the script? Instead of paying for four years of “discovery” in the most expensive lab in America—college—we could deploy software like YouScience and its best-in-class aptitude assessment, which helps students make informed, data-driven decisions about their futures. It’s the most effective tool on the market for connecting students with the right data and experiences, empowering them to confidently launch their careers. This approach moves beyond simple exposure and truly unlocks career readiness in a way that has the ability to help all students. It’s an absolute game-changer.

Isn’t it wiser to leverage this type of exposure for earlier, authentic experiences, like internships, apprenticeships, or job shadowing? This affords the student the opportunity to test drive careers before making irreversible financial commitments. Imagine the power of a 15 or 16-year-old realizing they’re wired for cybersecurity, industrial design, or advanced manufacturing before ever signing a loan document. That’s not only smarter for the student—it’s smarter for families, employers, and the entire economy.

Career Is the Constant

Here’s the truth: no matter what, it always ends with ‘career’. The plumber has a career. The nurse has a career. The welder, the teacher, the IT specialist, the biologist, the business owner—they all have careers.

‘College’ may or may not be part of the story. But ‘career’ is the constant. ***That’s why the phrase “College and Career Ready” gets it exactly backward.*** If we really mean what we say about preparing young people, the goal should be career-ready. Period.

If your chosen career requires a college education, then by all means—go. ***But don’t confuse the bridge with the destination.***

The False Dichotomy

Let’s talk about what happens when we continue to use “College and Career Ready.” Whether we realize it or not, we’re perpetuating a dichotomy:

- College = success.
- Career (without college) = consolation prize.

That dichotomy doesn’t just affect perception. It affects funding, programming, staffing, and parental pressure. Schools pour resources into Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, and SAT prep—while work-based learning coordinators scramble to build internship pipelines with shoestring budgets.

Schools proudly boast in their students’ college acceptance letters and love to celebrate academic and athletic scholarship signings, but when a young person is signing a letter of intent with a company, converting from their welding or electrical apprenticeship to full-time employment, where is the Pomp? Not even a little circumstance!



Signing a promissory letter for full-time employment gets little more than a polite nod compared to academic and athletic signing days. Language isn't neutral, and neither are actions. By saying "College and Career Ready," we covertly signal which one we think comes first.

Readiness Isn't Binary

Now let's dig into the last word: "ready."

Readiness sounds neat and tidy, but it's an illusion. ***It suggests there's a clear threshold: one day you're not ready, the next day you are. But readiness is not binary. It's messy and contextual.*** A student may be ready for a part-time job at 16, ready for a technical certification at 18, and ready for leadership at 25. Readiness depends on the industry, the employer, the moment, and the individual.

By promising to graduate every student "College and Career Ready," we sell a lie—that there's a universal checklist that works for every student, every pathway, every community. In reality, readiness is fluid and ongoing. There is no magic threshold!

What We Should Be Asking

If not "College and Career Ready," then what? We should be asking sharper questions:

- Are students developing transferable skills that outlast a single job or degree?
- Are they learning how to adapt as technology reshapes entire industries?
- Are they building networks, social capital, confidence, and problem-solving skills?
- Do they see education as lifelong, not just K-12 followed by a diploma?



These traits do not communicate "readiness"—they communicate resilience. That's agency. That's adaptability. That's self-advocacy! These are the traits that carry people through volatile job markets, economic downturns, and career changes.

Why Words Matter

This is where semantics becomes systems. Words shape funding. Words shape perception. Words shape what parents celebrate, what schools prioritize, and what students internalize about their worth.

When we persist in using "College and Career Ready," we:

- Reinforce outdated hierarchies.
- Elevate college as the preferred option.
- Treat career as a fallback rather than the constant.
- Flatten complex transitions into a binary "ready/not ready" checkbox.



This is not just semantics. It is sabotage—rooted in the system's preference for college over career. Even when 'career' finally receives a gentle wave of acknowledgment from said system through its inclusion in the moniker "College and Career Ready", 'career' is still notably subordinate. This gentle wave of acknowledgment is akin to a feint in boxing...a distraction with one hand, while a massive knockout punch is coming from the other! A not-so-subtle reminder that 'career' is still the little brother to 'college'.

Toward a Better Framework

So what should we say instead? My argument is simple: **Career Equipped or Career Positioned**.

Everything else flows from that. College may be one path to get there, but it's not the end goal. Industry-valued certifications, apprenticeships, military service, entrepreneurial ventures—those are also paths. ***Career Equipped or Career Positioned is the umbrella that encompasses them all.***

When we frame it this way, we reorient the system around the reality that careers—not colleges—are what sustain lives, families, and communities. #EDUVITALITY as Kristy Volesky would say!

The Challenge

Remember, ***students don't retire from college. They retire from their career.*** So here's the challenge I'll leave you with. The next time you see "College and Career Ready" on a banner, a website, a policy document, or a glossy brochure ask yourself:

- Who benefits from this phrasing?
- What assumptions are baked into it?
- And most importantly—are we really preparing students for careers, or are we still clinging to the illusion that college is the ultimate destination?

It's time to stop pretending college and career are equals on a balanced scale. One is a *possible bridge*, the other is ***the destination***. Let's stop propping up a false dichotomy and start telling the truth: our job is to help students become Career Ready.

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