Research Guide (Grades 7–12)
College and Career Competency: *Self-Awareness*

Definition:

Self-awareness is the capacity to become the object of one's own attention (Duval & Wicklund, 1972, as cited in Morin, 2011). Self-awareness can involve self-reflection (positive curiosity about self) or self-rumination (anxious attention paid to self); the former is associated with positive consequences, the latter with negative consequences (Morin, 2002). Self-awareness is also defined as a "self-perceptive state emerging from self-observation" (Cassidy, 2011, p. 992). It includes understanding one's own strengths, limitations, preferences, and interests.

Essential Components for Students:

1. Engage in self-assessment, self-observation, and reflection (on your experiences) and be open to the input of others.
2. Apply your understanding of your strengths, interests, and challenges (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2016).

Competency Sequence for Students:

These targets describe how students demonstrate competency knowledge (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018). These targets can be used to determine students' growth over time.

	Self-Awareness
Beginning	• Recognizes and identifies feeling words linked to various situations. • Communicates personal likes and dislikes. • Makes choices based on personal preferences.
Emerging	• Describes personal strengths and preferences. • Identifies words that describe basic personal emotions. • Demonstrates mindfulness for short periods. • Uses self-knowledge of preferences to inform decisions when opportunities arise.
Proficient	• Demonstrates ability to reflect on experiences and identifies personal strengths. • Describes personal feelings related to specific situations. • Describes own emotions with more expansive vocabulary and depth.

Research:

- During adolescence, there are considerable changes to self-concept, driven by rapid changes to the adolescent's interpersonal environment and new social roles they take on (Sebastian et al., 2008).
  - The adolescent's self-concept is formed by thinking directly about reactions to past events and experience (direct appraisal) and by thinking about how they are perceived by others (reflected appraisal; Sebastian et al., 2008).
  - Positive social feedback that supports a positive self-concept becomes increasingly important in adolescence; conversely, negative social experiences contribute to a

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negative self-concept that can lead to affective disorders like depression (Sebastian et al., 2008).

- Having a sense of self is important for development in three ways: 1) it helps the child develop a personal narrative that gives meaning to activities and experiences, 2) it allows the child to set goals consistent with self-image and guides behavioral choices, and 3) it can be a powerful motivator for future behavior (Jacobs et al., 2003).
- Adolescents may feel distress and confusion as a result of growing self-awareness of different (and seemingly opposite) characteristics (Jacobs et al., 2003).
  - o Teachers and others who work with adolescents need to recognize that the moodiness accompanying the search for "the real me" is typical, but should also be watchful that it not become prolonged and intense and lead to depression (Jacobs et al., 2003).
- Research conducted with Swedish adolescents (Ybrandt, 2008) concluded that it was important to promote positive self-concept because it was the most important factor for adjustment and mental health, especially for girls. The study also found that negative self-concept was associated with a higher risk of problem behaviors.
- Self-awareness leads to self-evaluation (i.e., monitoring progress on one's plan and reflecting on the overall result of the plan), which is important to **self-regulation** (Morin, 2011).
- Research shows three main sources of self-awareness: a) the social world, b) the physical world, and c) the self, including the brain (Morin, 2011).
- Researchers distinguish between private and public self-awareness (Govern & Marsch, 2001). Private self-awareness involves thinking about the self. Public self-awareness involves thinking about oneself as seen by others.
- Self-awareness by students can apply in the context of career interest and job seeking. As they gain a better understanding of their interests and skills, adolescents are better able to understand the opportunities that are available (Grote et al., 2014).
  - o Students with disabilities who exited school with high career awareness skills were more likely to be engaged in postschool employment or education (Benz et al., 1997).
- Self-awareness is part of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which provides an important foundation for better adjustment and academic performance for students (Durlak et al., 2011). Students who participate in SEL have more positive social behaviors, improved academics, fewer behavioral problems, and less distress even years after intervention (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2020).
- Self-determination is defined as "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field et al., 1998). One characteristic of self-determined individuals is self-awareness, which is a) awareness of personal preferences, strengths, and weaknesses, and b) the ability to differentiate between wants and needs (Field et al., 1998). When students are self-determined, they can advocate for themselves more effectively (DeMink-Carthew, 2020). For example, if a student knows that they are easily distracted, they can set up systems to manage distractions. Students with disabilities who leave school more self-determined than peers are twice as likely to be employed a year after graduation (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002, 2020a, 2020b).
- Self-awareness is a measure of intercultural competence, "in which the focus should be on self among others" (Khanukaeva, 2020, p. 119). It helps a person try to understand others because that person is constantly reflecting on what they see, aware of their own complexity and multiplicity of experience.
- Self-awareness allows adolescents to differentiate their emotions (Lennarz et al., 2018). Regulating emotions might be easier if they are seen as specific rather than general. For

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instance, it might be easier to regulate feeling frustrated than just feeling bad. In correlational studies, those who can delineate negative emotions are more psychologically well-adjusted.

- Learning to be self-aware "enables youth to modify and appraise events in order to intensify positive affect or to buffer against negative affect and stressful events," which builds youths' resilience and positive well-being (Mertens et al., 2022, p. 508). Youth without self-awareness tend to "generalize … failure to other aspects of their selves ... and disengage from the goals as they lose confidence in their abilities" (p. 509).
- In a study of adolescents (Zlotnik & Toglia, 2018), students with low self-awareness overestimated their academic performance; "the poorer the competence in a certain capacity, the larger the overestimation" (p. 5).
- Self-awareness allows students to use obstacles and inconveniences to confront their beliefs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, students with high self-awareness were able to adapt to online learning and reduce the perceived difficulty of using new technology and procedures (Yao et al., 2022).

Assessments:

Most self-report measures are designed to support the development of self-awareness. While specific tools measure whether a person is generally self-aware, a large range of tools inform a person's self-awareness related to specific constructs (e.g., career interest inventories, learning styles inventories, self-determination scales, academic interest scales, recreation inventories).

- The College & Career Competency Framework includes assessments designed to increase students' self-awareness related to the following constructs:
  - Assertiveness
  - Conflict Management
  - Empathy
  - Goal setting
  - Networking
  - Self-efficacy
  - Self-regulation

  Teachers can access the assessments by setting up a free account on https://www.cccstudent.org/ and following the instructions. Results of assessments are immediately available for reflection. Students (and teachers) can use individual results to identify behaviors to focus on cultivating or strengthening.
- The Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS; Fenigstein et al., 1975, as cited in Morin, 2011; Scheier & Carver, 2013) is a 23-item questionnaire that asks respondents how much various statements apply to them, such as "I'm always trying to figure myself out."
- The Self-Reflection/Self-Rumination Questionnaire (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999, as cited in Morin, 2011) is a 24-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale for statements like "Sometimes it is hard for me to shut off thoughts about myself."
- The book *Informal Assessments for Transition Planning*, 2nd edition (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013), provides an array of assessments that support students to develop self-awareness in working, learning, and living domains.
- Assessments by Kuder (n.d.) include the Kuder Career Interests Assessment, which supports youth in exploring career interests; the Kuder Skills Confidence Assessment, which asks youth to rate tasks and activities according to their level of confidence in performing the tasks; and the Kuder Work Values Assessment, which considers the characteristics of a workplace or type of

work. The results from each assessment are matched with professions. Many states have adopted and renamed the Kuder assessment system.

- The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessments (Casey Family Programs, 2022) are online measures designed for students ages 8–18 or older. Subscales within the ASLSA-IV Youth Scale include Career Planning, Daily Living, Housing and Money Management, **Self-Care**, Social Relationships, and Work Life. The assessments are available in English, Spanish, and French, including versions for youth and caregivers, through a free account.

Instructional Practices:

- The College & Career Competency Framework includes lesson sets designed to build students' self-awareness:
  - *Teaching Assertiveness in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Noonan et al., 2022)
  - *Teaching Conflict Management in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Noonan et al., 2017)
  - *Teaching Self-Efficacy in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2020a)
  - *Teaching Self-Regulation in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2020b)

  Each set outlines more than 25 instructional activities across eight lessons. The lessons include explicit instruction and application elements that teachers can modify based on students' experiences and needs. The lessons, accompanied by a PDF student workbook with worksheets that can be reproduced to facilitate learning, are available for purchase at https://www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks/.

- After administering assessments to students, facilitate self-awareness by ensuring that students understand their assessment results and can articulate preferences, needs, interests, and strengths to others. Offer opportunities to practice communicating personal information in supportive environments.

- In becoming more self-aware, students can find it helpful to connect feelings with actual emotion words. Using an emotion word chart, press students to go beyond using words like "angry" and "mad" to more deep feeling words (e.g., "lonely," "hopeless," "hurt"). The example here is from Vocabulary.com (2018).

- Mindfulness, which is the inclination to be aware in the moment without judging or thinking about particular outcomes (Napoli et al., 2005), can lead to enhanced self-awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chi et al., 2018; Felver et al., 2023).
  - Mindfulness training has been successfully incorporated into elementary and high school classrooms (Napoli et al., 2005). For high school students, two teachers led students in mindfulness meditation for 5–10 minutes daily. This took place 5 days per week for 5 weeks (Napoli et al., 2005).
  - In a 5-week program conducted in a Boston middle school, mindfulness, when used in conjunction with tai chi, successfully reduced stress and led to greater self-awareness (Wall, 2005). Separate groups for boys and girls met for one hour each week to learn tai chi movements and mindfulness-based stress

reduction exercises from a group leader. The program could also be led by a teacher or facilitator, but it is important that the leader have a working command of the skills necessary and practice the skills daily themselves (Wall, 2005).

- While assessments provide valuable information, it is also important to provide opportunities for students to engage in activities that will help support self-awareness. For instance, by sampling and reflecting on new experiences (e.g., job shadowing, volunteering, and leisure activities), students build self-awareness related to their interests, skills, and preferences.

- *I'm Determined* (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.) provides many lesson plans to support students' development of self-awareness as well as other areas of self-determination. The lesson plans are typically four pages long and include standards of learning, objectives, prerequisites, materials needed, the timeframe, the lesson procedure, evaluation, extending understanding, and student handouts. See an example of a lesson plan for middle school students on self-awareness and self-knowledge.

- Much literature has focused on evidence-based approaches to teaching self-determination skills to students with and without disabilities. To increase effectiveness of instruction, self-determination components can be taught using student-directed (as opposed to teacher-directed) practices. Some practices are:
  - Help students recognize and apply preferences by providing options for choices. For example, encourage students to make decisions about academic goals, schedules, and other areas that can affect day-to-day activities (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002, 2020a, 2020b). Teachers can use role-playing or brainstorming to help students identify choices and understand the link between the choices made and goals that are set (Wehmeyer, 2002).
  - Provide opportunities to choose among different strategies for a task (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002, 2020a, 2020b).
  - Help students realistically assess weaknesses in key skills and determine ways to address those weaknesses (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002, 2020a, 2020b). This should be done in a supportive environment where the emphasis is on the students' strengths but where students are given the opportunity to explore their limitations (Field et al., 1998).

This guide can be cited as: Gaumer Erickson, A. S., Noonan, P. M., & Lantz, T. (2023). *Research guide (Grades 7–12): College and career competency: Self-awareness*. College & Career Competency Framework. https://www.cccframework.org/

<div align="center">References and Resources</div>

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