



Solving the College Readiness Puzzle

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

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Introduction

In the summer of 2015, the first set of results from the Smarter Balanced and the PARCC college and career readiness exams will be announced. For the first time ever, we will have a state by state comparison of the college readiness of high school students. If current predictions hold, somewhere between 50–65% of all students will not meet the Common Core college-ready standard in math and/or English. It will be important for states to have clear plans for how to meet the needs of the high number of 11th-grade students who test below the college ready standard.¹ Any strategy must not only focus on instructional practices and curriculum to meet the needs of those students, but also enable some determination of college readiness that would ensure students who address their academic deficiencies during their senior year of high school are not reassessed and placed into remedial education once they enroll in postsecondary education. Without some guarantee to students that they are college ready, the Common Core State Standards movement will not have achieved the elusive goal of creating a seamless P-20 education system.

As states engage in the difficult work of solving the college readiness puzzle, it would be instructive to leverage the growing body of research and practice in the national college completion movement that is challenging and reforming traditional approaches to college

completion. Among the strategies being implemented by states is the transformation of assessment and placement practices and subsequent reforms in instruction that are resulting in more students being enrolled and successful in college-level work, effectively reducing the remedial education rate and facilitating improved college completion. Those implementing transition strategies for 11th graders who test below college ready should fully examine how the lessons learned in remedial education reform might influence the strategies for meeting the needs of high school students.

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Arbitrating College Readiness

The fundamental challenge facing state education systems invested in the Common Core State Standards is that higher education will retain its authority as the single and final arbiter of college readiness. In other words, the collective efforts of K-12 to get students college ready could be for naught, if postsecondary institutions continue to control access to college-level courses through their own assessment, placement, and instructional practices. The fear is that the Common Core end game, where students achieve a college and career readiness standard that all higher education institutions will accept, is ultimately unattainable.

In order to get the ironclad commitment from higher education that Common Core reformers seek, higher education institutions must have some skin in the college transition game. Higher education must be willing to implement concrete measures that provide assurances to students that they can be deemed college ready and exempt from remediation. Anything less than a guarantee could mean K-12 efforts to negotiate a definition of college readiness will fall short. If state education systems are going to successfully traverse this persistent divide, higher education will need to develop hard-wired mechanisms that use traditional higher education conventions, namely transferable college credit, to operationally define college ready.

Toward that end, there is a growing movement to reform postsecondary remedial education that is founded on groundbreaking research and innovative practice that can shape higher education's contribution to a system for successfully transitioning students into higher education. At the heart of the reform movement are new strategies, which prove that placing more students into college-level courses and providing them academic support while enrolled in those courses dramatically improves college success. These innovations are inspired by research, which reveals that traditional approaches for determining college readiness result in a disproportionate number of students being placed into remedial education, when many, if not most, could be successful in college-level courses.

Research has found that current practices, which rely on a single high-stakes college placement exam to sentence students to multiple semesters of remedial courses present unnecessary hurdles to college success.² The research reveals that as many as 50% of students who could be successful in college-level courses are placed into remedial courses.³ Further the research finds that placing these students into remediation actually discourages them ultimately and deters them from pursuing college-level work.⁴ Consequently, students who must complete one, two, or three semesters of remedial education lose steam and exit the system before ever enrolling in college-level courses. Said another way, the remedial education system filters students out of higher education, rather than funneling them into college-level courses. Innovators are redesigning the entire remedial education enterprise to remove the multiple hurdles students face to college-level courses. By placing less emphasis on assessment and placement systems and more emphasis on how to appropriately deliver instruction to academically underprepared students, colleges are seeing exponential improvements in student success in college-level gateway courses. The revelation that has emerged from these reforms is that more students are capable of college-level work than the system has previously recognized. There are several emerging, evidence-based models that eliminate long remedial education sequences, place students directly into college-level gateway courses, and provide those students basic skills instruction while enrolled in the relevant college-level gateway course. These models are achieving success rates at three times the rate of the traditional system.

Strategies like the Accelerated Learning Program out of the Community College of Baltimore County, Austin Peay State University's Structured Assistance Program, and the Charles A. Dana Center's New Mathways Project have essentially eliminated pre-requisite remedial education courses in favor of placing students directly into college-level gateway courses and providing remedial education as a co-requisite.

The new approaches to assessment and instructional delivery for academically underprepared students have tremendous implications for how the 11th-grade college- and career-readiness assessments will translate into instructional strategies for students who test below college ready. Like horseshoes and hand grenades, getting close to your target may be good enough. That is, setting a college-readiness standard does not mean those who don't meet that standard can't do college-level work. Instead, we should use the results of the 11th-grade college-readiness exams to differentiate instruction, in college-level content, rather than restrict access to it. By changing the college-readiness standard from an access tool to an instructional tool, we create a great opportunity to use the high school senior year as an on-ramp into higher education.

By adapting successful co-requisite instructional models from postsecondary education to the senior year of high school, we can fundamentally change the narrative about the college readiness of high school students. Properly envisioned and articulated, we can shift from the challenge of remediating the 66% of 11th graders who are not yet college ready to the opportunity to enroll the majority of high school seniors into college-level gateway math and English courses, resulting in students earning college credit that provides a valuable on-ramp into postsecondary programs.

Making the leap from developing strategies for addressing Common Core academic deficiencies to transitioning students into college-level coursework during the senior year will appear overwhelming to many—and likely will be for states that are not already well down the road to reforming remedial education in postsecondary education. Nevertheless, for those states committed to improvements in college-ready and college-completion rates, creating a comprehensive strategy that involves reform in both K-12 and higher education may achieve the greatest impact.

Fortunately, there are many states that are moving aggressively to transform remedial education and are adopting policies and practices that lay a sound foundation for a comprehensive P-20 college readiness solution. They are as follows:

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Develop and scale a co-requisite remediation model in higher education

Currently, only about 22% of community college students and 37% of students at four-year institutions ever pass a gateway college course in math or English within two academic years.⁵ Conversely, research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) suggests that at least 50% of all students who are currently placed into remedial education could be successful in college-level gateway courses in math and/or English if they were placed directly in traditional college-gateway courses.⁶ Placing students directly into college-level gateway courses and then providing them academic support through additional instructional hours or mandatory tutoring can result in success rates of over 70% in gateway courses.⁷

Connecticut, Colorado, and Tennessee are among the states that have policies that require the use of co-requisite strategies at their institutions. West Virginia, Indiana, Texas, and Arkansas are among 10 states that are in the midst of implementing large scale co-requisite course redesigns.

Creating co-requisite remedial education course options in colleges makes it easier for colleges and universities to translate those strategies into the senior year of high school. For example, Indiana has begun to explore the development of a quantitative reasoning dual enrollment course that would be available in a co-requisite model to Indiana high school seniors.

Use multiple measures, like high school GPA, to determine college readiness

One potential concern among those involved in remedial education reform is that transition strategies based on the results of 11th-grade college- and career-readiness exams will replicate failed assessment, placement, and remedial education instruction practices. Research has proven that reliance on a single assessment with a single cut score to determine whether a student is or is not college ready results in a significant percent of students being “underplaced” into remedial education.⁸ In addition, research has found that students who test short of college ready and are placed into remedial education courses are often discouraged from pursuing postsecondary work. While the new assessments being developed by PARCC and Smarter Balanced will be more robust instruments than traditional placement exams—there is still reason to question whether a simple ready/not ready assessment is the best way to meet their needs.

Many states and postsecondary institutions are incorporating additional measures to determine whether students are ready for college-level work. CCRC has found that simply incorporating high school GPA will improve the placement process.⁹ Recently, Long Beach City College developed a multiple measure strategy that resulted in a significant increase in the percent of students being placed directly into college-level gateway courses without the need for remediation.¹⁰

High school GPA could be an even more powerful tool in a Common Core world. Students with three to four years, not to mention 11 or 12 years of success in a Common Core curriculum would stand to be more successful in college-level courses, regardless of their score on a college readiness exam. As a result, reforms to placement practices in postsecondary education should inform similar practices in K-12.

States such as Connecticut, Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee have policies that require the use of multiple measures for placement. In addition, 14 other states that responded to a recent survey from Complete College America indicated that they intend to implement policies requiring the use of multiple measures in 2013.

Develop transferable gateway college courses aligned to programs of study offered in high school

Postsecondary completion research and practice is indicating that the sooner a student enters a program of study, the more likely he or she is are to earn a college credential.¹¹ Unfortunately, college-ready standards do not recognize the different content knowledge that is required to succeed in various programs of study. As a result, many students are expected to complete content, particularly in math, that is not required for their program of study. In particular, the default curricular pathway in remedial math at many postsecondary institutions is typically focused on college algebra, when in fact quantitative reasoning or statistics is more appropriate for most students. Through the leadership of the Dana Center and the Carnegie Foundation, many postsecondary systems and institutions are developing college-level gateway math courses in statistics and quantitative reasoning that align to the large number of non-algebra-based college programs.

The research and practice in this area is particularly relevant to the algebra-based Common Core State Standards and assessments. Replicating the singular algebra-only pathway into higher education would be unfortunate when an emerging and more dynamic approach is available. Utilizing the results from the 11th-grade college -and career-readiness assessments to sort most students into a single, remedial transition course during the senior year—that is not connected to a student’s college plans would be a missed opportunity.

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Under the leadership of Uri Treisman, the Charles A. Dana Center’s Math Pathways project is designing year-long course pathways in quantitative reasoning and statistics for colleges that weave remedial content in with college-level content, resulting in students passing gateway math courses within one academic year. The Dana Center also incorporates student success strategies and other student supports that enable students to not only master academic content, but also be fully prepared for college. The Dana Center approach could be easily adapted for high school seniors, particularly when you consider that high schools provide even more instructional contact hours for students than colleges. Further, these courses could be designed to fulfill additional high school requirements. Most importantly, students who complete those courses in high school can immediately progress into academic programs once they fully matriculate to postsecondary institutions.

Several states are developing the math pathways approach for their higher education institutions. Currently six states involved in the Complete College America Alliance of States have policies promoting the math pathways approach and another 14 are developing strategies to do so in 2013. Indiana’s Ivy Tech Community College is currently developing a quantitative reasoning course that will be fully transferable to all Indiana postsecondary institutions under the state’s new common general education core. Approaches like those underway in Indiana would enable high schools across the state to use dual enrollment to deliver the quantitative reasoning course to all their students, with the added guarantee that it would be fully transferable to any state postsecondary institution.

Ensure dual credit policies allow students to enroll in gateway college courses

While most states have dual enrollment/dual credit options for students, many states have policies that limit access to dual enrollment based on high school performance or performance on college placement exams. Dual enrollment is often reserved for those who meet college-ready standards. However, research shows that the students who are traditionally underserved by higher education, namely low-income students and low-achieving high school students, benefit the most from dual enrollment. According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC), lower-income and lower-achieving high school students saw far more significant increases in grade point averages when they enrolled in dual enrollment courses when compared to their higher-achieving and higher-income dual enrollment counterparts.

In addition, the CCRC research found how the arbitrary nature of college placement exams can restrict access to dual enrollment for the very students who could benefit most. In Florida, high school students were able to enroll in a college algebra course if they passed a college placement exam. Students who were allowed to take the college algebra class were 16 percentage points more likely to go to college and 23 points more likely to earn an associate or bachelor’s degree than similar students who scored just below the cut score on the college placement exam and were not allowed to enroll in the college gateway course in high school.¹² CCRC concludes that the reliance on a single placement exam had a negative impact on college success for many students. The evidence suggests that encouraging more students to enroll in and complete dual enrollment courses can positively impact college completion rates.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, there is reason to believe that traditional structures and methods within higher education for assessing college readiness are changing. Evidence is mounting that drawing a hard, fast, and arbitrary line for accessing college-level gateway courses is impeding college success for thousands of students. Furthermore, additional evidence suggests that the best strategy for students who are not optimally prepared for higher education is for them to immediately enroll in college gateway courses and receive academic support along the way.

It is increasingly clear from reforms to remedial education that the traditional college readiness debate between higher education and K-12 is about to change. It would be unfortunate if implementation of the Common Core State Standards does not attend to these changes and instead reinforces the existing and failed approach to determining college readiness. With many higher education institutions changing the way they assess, place and serve students—it only makes sense for a reform as important as the Common Core State Standards to jump out onto the crest of the remedial education reform wave and build the latest reforms in higher education into their strategies—further challenging both K-12 and higher education to re-examine how to most successfully transition students into and through higher education.

The Common Core State Standards provide the opportunity to develop a set of gateway college-level courses that enable students to both meet Common Core State Standards and earn credit in transferable college-level gateway courses that can be developed and shared with high schools and colleges across the nation.

Endnotes

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