



# Preparing High School Students for College

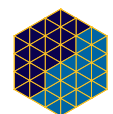
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MAY 2012

THE COLLEGE  
READINESS  
PARTNERSHIP  
STUDY

Executive Summary



National Center for Postsecondary Research  
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## Overview

About 40 percent of traditional college students take at least one remedial course to prepare for college-level coursework. According to scholars and policymakers, one cause of this problem is the misalignment of high school graduation standards and college academic expectations. College readiness partnership programs attempt to address this problem by facilitating students' transition to college. These programs, co-sponsored by a college and K-12 organization (usually a high school), are explicitly designed to prepare high school students to enter college ready to undertake college-level work.

The current study examines a number of college readiness partnership programs operating in Texas and identifies their features, targeted students, and intended outcomes. It also examines the partnerships that created these programs. The findings presented here are based on a search and analysis of the relevant research and Texas policy literature, an online scan of college readiness partnership programs in Texas with a web presence, and site visits to high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations in the Houston and Dallas–Fort Worth areas. The authors observed that most college readiness partnership programs could be classified into two types: those that focused on academic subjects and those that focused on college knowledge. The former tended to be intensive, short-term programs that targeted a small group of students and provided a direct experience of college; the latter tended to be light-touch, long-term programs that were open to all students and provided little direct experience of college.

Although few rigorous evaluations of these programs have been conducted, their potential to improve college readiness for students in the “academic middle” is generally supported by the literature and the research presented here. The authors identify a number of implications for college readiness partnership programs and the partnerships themselves. It is clear that college readiness partnerships create opportunities for secondary and postsecondary institutions to leverage each other's services, eliminating redundant services and aligning programming to maximize gains for students. In some cases, college readiness partnership programs also lead to long-lasting relationships between institutions and continued collaboration. College readiness partnership programs may have the best chance of improving outcomes if commonly encountered challenges — such as issues related to student recruitment and program sustainability — are considered early in the planning stages. The authors emphasize the value of choosing interventions that show the greatest promise in a given context and matching students to the interventions that best meet their needs; they also note that building a stronger evidence base would enhance high schools' and colleges' ability to make sound decisions about which potential program models to implement.



## Preface

Many students who graduate from high school and enroll in college take at least one developmental course to prepare for college-level coursework. Not all of these students performed poorly in high school; many enter college feeling confident about their knowledge and abilities and are surprised to find themselves assigned to developmental courses. Indeed, high schools and colleges often have different ideas about what it means for students to be “college ready.”

*College readiness partnership programs* are one way to attempt to bridge the disconnect between the K-12 and postsecondary education systems. In such programs, colleges and K-12 districts (particularly their high schools) work together to try to ensure that students are ready for college-level coursework before they enroll in college. The partnerships take a variety of forms. Some are short and intense and take place in the summer; others include a series of activities that take place throughout the school year. While some focus on academic skills, others offer lessons about college norms and expectations. Yet in all these partnership programs, high schools and colleges share responsibility for delivering programming designed to prepare students for college.

Using information from a literature review, an online scan, and site visits to programs, this report explores the terrain of college readiness partnerships, focusing primarily on those operating in the state of Texas. In doing so, the report expands our understanding of these partnerships and programs, which, while still relatively uncommon, appear to be growing in popularity. One fact that is made clear is that few rigorous evaluations of partnership programs have taken place. Knowing more about what types of programming produce the best student outcomes would better inform the decisions of high schools and colleges as they look to establish new partnership programs or expand the ones they already have.

Despite the scarcity of empirical evidence on college readiness partnerships, there are reasons to believe that they may enhance students’ college preparation. There is ample evidence that high school and college standards are misaligned; at the very least college readiness partnerships generate conversations between institutions about the disconnect between high school graduation standards and college academic expectations. If implemented well, partnership programs also have the potential to reduce the need for remediation in college. And beyond their immediate effects, college readiness partnerships can result in long and fruitful relationships between participating institutions that serve as the foundation for increased alignment and collaborative programming that can benefit students.

Thomas Bailey  
Director, NCPR





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Finally, we thank the hundreds of students who participated in this study. We hope the findings from this study will be used to improve the programs and institutions that serve them.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

In his 2009 State of the Union address, President Obama pledged federal government support to ensure that the United States has the world's highest postsecondary graduation rate by 2020 (Obama, 2009). One of the many challenges that must be addressed in order to achieve this objective is the problem of incoming college students' academic deficiencies. Even though many matriculating college students are recent high school graduates, about 40 percent of traditional students take at least one remedial course to prepare for college-level coursework (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). The costs associated with this problem are high, both for taxpayers and students.

Scholars and policymakers contend that a key underlying cause of this problem is a fundamental misalignment between high school graduation standards and college academic expectations (Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). However, the research gives no indication that such a misalignment is inevitable. It is possible that fewer students would need remedial coursework upon entrance to college if postsecondary institutions took a more active role in facilitating students' transitions from high school to college. In fact, improving alignment through close coordination between the secondary and postsecondary levels may improve students' college readiness and their outcomes in college.

The current study aims to understand one set of initiatives intended to improve alignment — herein called *college readiness partnership programs*. College readiness partnership programs are co-sponsored by a college and K-12 organization, usually a high school, and are explicitly designed to prepare high school students to enter college ready to undertake college-level work. We examine a number of college readiness partnership programs that are currently operating in Texas and identify their features, targeted students, and intended outcomes. We also examine the partnerships that created these programs. This study of college readiness partnership programs in Texas has two research goals:

- to identify, describe, and classify existing partnership programs intended to better prepare high school students for college, particularly those at risk of placing into developmental education courses or otherwise underprepared for postsecondary education; and
- to investigate and describe the partnerships between high schools and colleges, specifically their engagement with each other as they work to prepare high school students to take credit-bearing courses upon college entry.

To address these goals, we carried out three activities: (1) a search and analysis of the relevant research and Texas policy literature (the results of which appear in the next section of this chapter), (2) an online scan of college readiness partnership programs in Texas with a web presence, and (3) a series of four trips to multiple high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations in the Houston and Dallas–Fort Worth areas. The research was conducted in Texas due to its policy focus on issues of college access and readiness and because of NCPR’s involvement in related research projects in the state.

## **Key Findings on College Readiness Partnership Programs**

A review of the existing research literature reveals that pre-college interventions may help underprepared students to improve their college readiness and reduce the need for remediation by addressing academic and skill deficits (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003; Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997; Gándara, 2001; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna, Fenske, & Swail, 2000). However, there have been few rigorous evaluations of program effectiveness for college readiness programs in general, and relatively little is known about how well these programs work. Further, very little literature exists that describes the characteristics or effectiveness of college readiness *partnership* programs in particular.

Using data gathered through an online scan, we identified characteristics of college readiness partnership programs, a subset of college readiness programs. Among the college readiness partnership programs that we identified, federally funded programs dominated the landscape, accounting for 72 percent of the 133 programs found. State programs accounted for 16 percent of the programs, and locally developed and funded programs accounted for 12 percent.

### **Selected Program Models Studied**

Because federally funded programs follow a fairly uniform model and are already well described, we focused on state and local program models in Texas. We identified 37 state and local programs in the online scan, and we observed a range of programs during our site visits, which are broadly represented by the models described here. All programs were offered through a partnership between a high school and a college.

#### **Academic-Focused Programs**

The programs we observed that focused primarily on academics were likely to engage with smaller groups of students at risk of placing into developmental education in college. Four program models are highlighted here: summer bridge programs, school year transition programs, senior year transition courses, and early assessment/intervention programs.

**Summer bridge programs**, generally offered to rising 11th and 12th grade students, aspire to improve students' reading, writing, and math skills. They most often include four to six weeks of intensive, all-day programming and are usually held on college campuses. An example is the University of Texas at Arlington's Transitions program, which includes direct math and reading instruction as well as a researched-based STEMS (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and social science) curriculum.

**School year transition programs** offer activities similar to those in summer bridge programs, but the programming occurs during the school year. Houston Community College (HCC), with funds from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), offers the HCC Southeast Transitional Program to high school juniors, which runs on Saturdays throughout the spring semester for approximately 16 weeks. In addition to offering intensive academic skill building, this program includes college knowledge components.

In **senior year transition courses**, longer term academic programming is offered to larger groups of students in a course format. For example, at Nimitz High School in Houston, a college developmental math class is offered as the default course for students in their senior year; students are enrolled in this course unless they opt to take a higher-level math course. This program also incorporates a college knowledge component.

**Early assessment/intervention programs** offer students the chance to take college placement tests while in high school, providing them with information on their college readiness. This type of program is commonly offered in Texas. For example, in the El Paso school district, students complete a joint application to El Paso Community College (EPCC) and the University of Texas at El Paso, take college placement tests, receive assistance in making up any deficiencies identified through testing, and retake the tests when necessary.

### College Knowledge–Focused Programs

The college knowledge–focused programs we observed were generally less intensive, more sustained, and more likely to be offered during the academic year than academic-focused programs. Some specific examples include targeted outreach programs, multi-year college readiness programs, embedded college counseling, and college readiness lessons.

**Targeted outreach programs**, intended to encourage specific populations to attend college, offer information and counseling to students who are considered at risk of not attending college. For example, Brookhaven College in Dallas has targeted Thomas Jefferson High School over the last three years for intensive outreach efforts. The college selected this high school because it is located in an underserved area with many low-

income, Hispanic students. The college’s outreach strategies have included a concerted marketing campaign, college admissions days, opportunities for early assessment, and hands-on financial aid workshops.

**Multi-year college readiness programs** provide students with sustained support and may offer a variety of services during high school. Project GRAD — a collaboration between a nonprofit organization, the Houston School District, and several colleges and universities — offers both academic and social supports to help students prepare for college. Its primary emphasis is on helping students to view college-going as a realistic option by providing counseling, support, and collegiate-type experiences, such as participation in a range of summer bridge programs.

In **embedded college counseling programs**, colleges provide college counseling within a high school setting. For example, Lone Star College–CyFair places advisors in local high schools. The advisors focus on helping students navigate the college admissions and financial aid processes. They describe the main goal of the program as helping students “realize that they can go to college” and promoting a “college going atmosphere” among high school students.

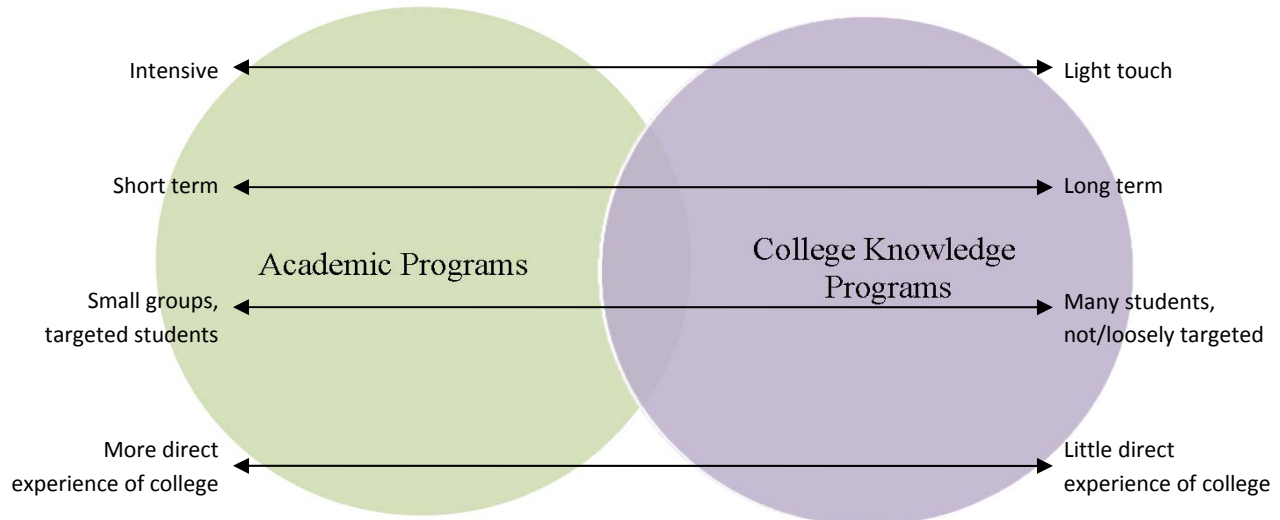
**College readiness lessons** supply students with information about college and attempt to foster a college-going culture. For instance, the K-16 Bridge program, sponsored by San Jacinto College in Houston, includes six to eight classroom lessons per semester taught by high school teachers during the regular school day. These lessons are supplemented by self-directed assignments that students access online. Students in the K-16 bridge program learn about colleges, academic programs, financial aid, and careers, among other topics.

### **Program Typology**

We observed that college readiness partnership programs could often be classified as *academic-focused* or *college knowledge-focused*. In academic-focused programs, students primarily studied academic subjects (most often reading, writing, and mathematics); in college knowledge-focused programs, students learned about college planning, applying to college, financial aid, and navigating college life. Further, the programs fell on a series of continua of the type described in Figure ES.1. While programs often included a blend of features, there was a tendency for academic-focused programs to include the features found on the left side and for college knowledge-focused programs to include those on the right.

**Figure ES.1**

**College Readiness Partnership Program Typology**



**Key Findings on College Readiness Partnerships**

The most common partnerships we observed were between school districts and postsecondary institutions, followed by those involving multiple partners in a region. We examined how partners engage with one another to assist high school students in entering college prepared to take college-level courses. Our major observations fall into three categories: key characteristics of partnerships, potential benefits, and barriers and challenges.

**Key Characteristics**

**Intensity**

The partnerships we observed varied in the intensity of their relationships. The less intense relationships involved *coordination*, or networking and sharing information. The more intense relationships involved *collaboration*, with joint planning and power sharing.

**Commitment**

Program observations and interviews conducted during our site visits suggest that college readiness partnerships require institutional commitment for strong program

implementation. For example, having dedicated staff who manage programs and have a presence in the high schools appears to be important.

### **The Role of Champion**

Many partnerships had one or more individuals who had a deep interest in their success and were considered by others as their champion(s). It was clear that their energy and vision was driving much of these partnerships' vision and activities.

### **Funding, Policy, and Partnerships**

Among the partnerships we visited, both funding and policy mandates clearly influenced the intensity and focus of partnerships. While those interviewed talked of many reasons to work together, policy changes (e.g., Closing the Gaps by 2015) or funding availability (e.g., College Connections funds from the state) influenced the extent to which collaboration actually occurred.

### **Potential Benefits**

Depending on a range of contextual factors, a number of benefits may be associated with the formation and sustainability of college readiness partnerships, including:

- optimization of efforts to improve student outcomes, i.e., improvements in effectiveness and efficiency;
- additional opportunities for college student recruitment;
- alignment of academic standards and assessment, which reduces the gap between high school graduation requirements and college expectations;
- sharing of best practices across institutions;
- cross-system faculty development; and
- opportunities for additional ongoing, mutually beneficial initiatives and actions.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

While there may be many reasons to develop college readiness partnerships, certain conditions make it difficult to do so, including:



- lack of funding streams that reward collaborative efforts between colleges and high schools;
- lack of financial and other resources for new interventions;
- differences in the cultural norms and priorities of higher education and K-12 systems; and
- complex patterns of student progression that occur when students from a given high school go to multiple colleges and universities, which make it more difficult to customize programs to prepare students for college.

## **Implications and Reflections**

### **Implications for Future Research**

Although few rigorous evaluations of college readiness partnership programs have been conducted, both the literature and our research findings generally support their potential to improve college readiness for students in the “academic middle,” who are likely to graduate high school intending to go to college but are at risk of being placed in developmental education courses. Strong, collaborative partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary institutions can be challenging to maintain, given the structure of our educational system and the current state of the economy, but these partnerships appear to offer advantages in creating programs that can help alleviate gaps in students’ college readiness. Our work suggests the need for more rigorous effectiveness trials of current and future programs for these students as well as studies of their costs and benefits. Program leaders, college and high school administrators, and policymakers would benefit from more extensive and higher quality information on which of these programs have the greatest impact given different levels of investment.

### **Implications for College Readiness Partnership Programs**

Our research suggests that those seeking to implement college readiness partnership programs should consider the following points:

- Choosing interventions that show the greatest promise in a given context can enhance the chances of success. This selection should reflect current research on effective practice.
- Many programs, especially those that are intensive, can only serve limited numbers of students. Institutions may want to match college-going

students who are academically underprepared with more intensive programs and direct those students who primarily need assistance with college knowledge to less intensive programs.

- Explicitly linking secondary and postsecondary college readiness programs may allow each type of institution to leverage the services of the other, creating an opportunity to maximize the potential gains for students.
- Common challenges are worth considering — and planning for — early in the development of college readiness partnership programs. These include student recruitment and participation and program sustainability.

### **Implications for College Readiness Partnerships**

Our findings indicate that colleges and high schools forming partnerships should consider ways to maximize the benefits derived from them. They may wish to:

- deepen existing partnerships to promote cost efficiencies, long-term program sustainability, and systemic changes, such as the improved alignment of curriculum and assessment practice;
- use partnerships to eliminate redundant services and align remaining services to reduce the resources required to support college readiness programming and create a more cost-effective system; and
- use intermediaries to support and complement the roles of the key partnership institutions.

### **Closing Thoughts**

In sum, earning a postsecondary credential has become essential for securing a good job in today's labor market; indeed, the disparity in earnings between those with and without a college degree continues to grow. Yet currently, the pathway from high school to college does not reliably lead to a college degree. If high schools and colleges partner to improve the creation, enhancement, and alignment of supports for transitioning students, they may be able to help more students attain a degree and help the country to meet its goals for college completion and a stronger economy.

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