

Reshaping the College Transition: States That Offer Early College Readiness Assessments and Transition Curricula

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Despite the fact that many states have increased their high school graduation requirements over the last several years, too many graduates are still underprepared for college (Bailey, 2009) and the workforce (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Reasons for this underpreparedness include, among other factors: (1) a lack of clear information on students' progress toward college and career readiness during the high school years that could allow students to address gaps in knowledge and skills, and (2) a mismatch between what high schools teach and the expectations of colleges and employers (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

An approach is emerging to remedy this issue. States across the country are administering assessments that measure 11th grade students' readiness to successfully perform entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary coursework. Early college readiness assessments can inform students of additional skills they need to gain in mathematics, reading, or writing to enter college without the need for remediation.

As a further step, some states are combining early college readiness assessments with structured interventions, which we call *transition curricula*, for students who are not college ready. Transition curricula consist of a course, a set of modules, online tutorials, or other educational experiences offered no later than 12th grade to students who are at risk of being placed into remedial mathematics, reading, or writing when they enter college (Kannapel, 2012). The availability of transition curricula means that students will no longer need to figure out how to improve their college readiness on their own; rather, they can enroll in a course or other activity in an attempt to attain a higher level of preparation, which might possibly help them avoid remediation (known also as developmental education) altogether. Taken together, early college readiness assessments and transition curricula have the potential to transform the senior year of high school and reconceptualize the high school to college pathway.

State Scan

Although early college readiness assessments and transition curricula are promising approaches, little is known about the availability of these interventions across the country (Wathington et al., 2012). We conducted a scan to ascertain in which states these approaches have been undertaken and to find out whether they are implemented as part of a statewide initiative or developed by individual colleges or schools.

To identify these states, we went through a two-step process. We first carried out a search of literature and internet resources to find any references to early college readiness assessments or transition curricula in each of the 50 states and Washington, DC. Second, we created and administered a brief survey to state agency representatives asking about the presence of these initiatives and whether they were implemented statewide, locally run, or still in the planning process.¹ Based on the findings of the online survey, we also conducted brief follow-up interviews with officials from selected states to gather more information, when necessary. If there was a discrepancy between information obtained in the online search and from the survey, we used the information provided by state agency representatives.²

An Example of an Early College Readiness Assessment

In El Paso, Texas, all levels of the education system are working cooperatively to prepare students for college. Juniors and seniors at all 12 area high schools are offered information about the college placement testing process and then assessed on their level of college readiness. Those not considered college-ready are given access to online modules that they can use to improve their skills before they matriculate to college. This initiative has had very positive results—from fall 2009 through summer 2010, 65 percent of students who participated in the program improved by at least one level of developmental math, 65 percent improved by at least one level of developmental reading, and 47 percent improved by at least one level of developmental writing (Jobs for the Future, 2012). The initiative is run by the El Paso College Readiness Consortium, a joint effort of the University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Community College, and area school districts.

Table 1 Column Label Explanations

Early Assessment: Early college readiness assessments are examinations administered no later than the 11th grade that measure students' readiness to successfully perform in entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary coursework.

Transition Curricula: Offered no later than the 12th grade, these are courses, learning modules, or online tutorials are provided to students who are at risk of being placed into remedial mathematics, reading, or writing when they enter college.

State: Indicates that there is a *state initiative* to offer this intervention across a state, which includes oversight from a state agency.

Local: Indicates that this intervention is offered in specific schools using locally developed approaches, without oversight by a state agency.

In Progress: Indicates that preparatory activities are underway to implement an intervention.

¹ We received responses from 53 officials in 45 states.

² The research was conducted from September 2012 through February 2013. Several respondents indicated that they were in the process of implementing early college readiness assessments and transition curricula. In such cases, we considered their work "in progress" (as shown in Table 1), but we counted only states that offered these interventions by February 2013 as those currently providing early assessments and transition curricula.

Table 1. Results of 50 State Scan and Survey^a

STATE	EARLY ASSESSMENT				TRANSITION CURRICULA			
	State	Local	In Progress	None	State	Local	In Progress	None
Alabama	x					x		
Alaska				x				x
Arizona ^b				x			x	
Arkansas ^b		x					x	
California	x					x		
Colorado ^b	x							x
Connecticut		x				x		
Delaware	x					x		
District of Columbia	x				x			
Florida ^b	x				x			
Georgia ^b	x						x	
Hawaii			x					x
Idaho	x							x
Illinois	x				x			
Indiana ^b	x						x	
Iowa ^c	x							x
Kansas				x		x		
Kentucky ^b	x				x			
Louisiana ^b	x							x
Maine		x				x		
Maryland	x					x		
Massachusetts		x				x		
Michigan	x					x		
Minnesota	x					x		
Mississippi ^b		x					x	
Missouri			x					x
Montana			x				x	
Nebraska		x				x		
Nevada		x				x		
New Hampshire		x						x
New Jersey		x				x		
New Mexico	x					x		
New York ^b		x				x		
North Carolina ^b	x						x	
North Dakota			x					x
Ohio ^b			x					x
Oklahoma ^b	x						x	
Oregon				x				x
Pennsylvania	x							x
Rhode Island		x				x		
South Carolina		x				x		
South Dakota				x			x	
Tennessee ^b	x				x			
Texas	x				x			
Utah		x				x		
Vermont				x		x		
Virginia	x				x			
Washington				x		x		
West Virginia	x				x			
Wisconsin			x			x		
Wyoming	x							x
Total	25	13	6	7	8	21	9	13

^a See column label explanations at bottom of previous page. The scan and survey also included the District of Columbia.

^b State affiliated with the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) initiative to develop, review, and/or pilot transition courses according to survey responses, interviews, or the SREB website (see http://www.sreb.org/page/1508/transitional_course_information.html).

^c State in which researchers were unable to find complete information on activities regarding transition curricula.

Findings

We found that some form of early college readiness assessment is offered in 38 states. Of these, 25 are implemented through state initiatives and 13 through local initiatives. The types of early college readiness assessments employed include college placement tests such as the ACCUPLACER or COMPASS, college admissions exams such as the SAT and ACT, and state accountability tests with a college readiness benchmark such as California’s Early Assessment Program (EAP) test. Many states that do not currently assess college readiness expect to do so using assessments as they become available through PARCC or Smarter Balanced, two consortia creating assessments that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (see Barnett & Fay, 2013).

We found 29 states in which transition curricula are offered. Various types of transition courses are provided, including face-to-face and online formats. More transition courses are offered in math than in English. The majority of transition curricula interventions we identified are implemented through local initiatives. In 21 states, courses were developed by individual high schools or districts, sometimes in partnership with colleges. In the remaining eight states, there was a statewide effort led by either a K-12 or higher education agency. However, based on the affiliation of the respondents to our survey, it appears that transition curricula initiatives are more often led by K-12 state agencies than postsecondary state agencies.

We also found that transition curricula interventions are more likely to be under current development in states affiliated with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). This organization has been a leader in encouraging states to develop clear plans to increase college readiness among high school graduates and in supporting the use of transition curricula in particular.

Overall, the results of our scan show that implementation of early college readiness assessments and transition curricula is widespread. In more than half of all states, early assessments and transition curricula are made available for students at some schools, often through statewide initiatives. And the number of state and local initiatives seems to be growing. Future CCRC research will investigate these approaches to college readiness in multiple states.

An Example of Early College Transition Curricula

During the 2011–12 academic year, high schools throughout Virginia piloted *capstone courses* in math and English developed under the auspices of the Virginia Department of Education. This initiative was undertaken as part of a larger effort to better prepare students for college and careers, advanced by the Southern Regional Education Board. The capstone courses were designed for students who were on track to graduate high school and planning to attend college, but not considered college ready. These courses were composed of units aligned with Virginia’s Performance Standards, a subset of the state’s Standards of Learning that students must master to be considered college ready. The capstone course units were developed by teachers throughout the state with guidance from four participating universities. The units were designed to engage students in project-based learning and intensive hands-on activities to prepare them for participation in rigorous college courses. Wathington et al. (2012) provide a detailed description of the pilot year.

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