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South Carolina Course Alignment Project

Best Practices Report

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Framework

To facilitate a more seamless transition from high school to postsecondary education, high schools and colleges need to build new relationships and examine educational programming on both sides of the critical juncture between the senior year in high school and the first year in college. The South Carolina Course Alignment Project (SC CAP) creates the framework within which all aspects of this critical transition can be examined and, where necessary, redesigned to help promote greater student success and higher rates of postsecondary participation.

Economics of Degree Completion

Improving the transition from high school to college is important to South Carolina for several reasons. The reality of the 21st-century economy is that obtaining a postsecondary degree or career training is crucial to build a successful and prosperous future, for the benefit of the student as an individual and for the state as a whole. A cursory examination of median weekly earnings for workers aged 25 and older with varying levels of education helps illustrate this point. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report for the first quarter of 2014, workers with a high school diploma and no college experience earned $367 weekly. Earning an associate's degree led to an increase of 8.4% in weekly earnings over a high school diploma, to $398. Workers with a bachelor's degree earned an average weekly income of $540, 47% more than those who earned only a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014b).

Unemployment rates are also correlated with educational attainment rates for U.S. workers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Education protects workers during times of high unemployment. In 2013, annual unemployment rates for workers aged 25 and older with only a high school diploma averaged 7.5%. Even some college credit without a degree gave adults the upper hand; the unemployment rate for this group was 7.0%. Finishing a degree lowered the rate further to 5.4% for those with a two-year or associate's degree. Finally, the unemployment rate for workers with a four-year bachelor's degree or higher was 3.7%, giving them what could be considered an unemployment protection rate of 3.8% over those who earned only a high school diploma.

These rates are for all racial and ethnic groups combined. For African Americans in particular, the unemployment protection factor was even more dramatic in 2013. African Americans aged 25 and over with only a high school diploma experienced unemployment rates of 12.6%. African American workers with a bachelor's degree or higher experienced an unemployment rate of 5.7%, or a protection rate of almost 7% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014a).

In addition, the dynamically changing nature of the South Carolina economy and predicted job growth rate of 1.7% suggest that the demand for students with postsecondary levels of education will continue to increase rapidly (Burris, 2013). Improving college participation and completion in a way that leads to increasing economic opportunities, growth, and international competitiveness are of paramount importance for the future of the state's economy.

Strengthening Student Preparation to Promote Success in South Carolina

Many high school students in South Carolina are not prepared for postsecondary education. Compared to national statistics, South Carolina's population has a larger proportion of first-generation college attenders and economically disadvantaged students. The average household income is nearly $8,500 lower than the national average. Average birth rates in South Carolina are lower than the national average (2.54 live births per woman vs. 2.61), but the lower birth rate is not relieving economic pressures: 17.6% of South Carolina households live below the poverty line, compared to 14.9% nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). South Carolinians also have educational attainment levels below the national rates, with 1.7% lower high school diploma attainment and 3.9% lower rates of bachelor's degree attainment.

South Carolina students need an educational system carefully attuned to their specific needs and the challenges they face. One of the key elements for success in such a system is a high degree of careful alignment between high school and college so that students know what is expected of them and can prepare accordingly. A prepared student is more likely to persist in and complete postsecondary education. When students enroll in the Paired Courses developed for the SC CAP, they have the opportunity to learn in a high school course that is closely aligned to and sequenced with a paired college course.

Purpose of the Project

The goal of this project is to strengthen alignment between high school and college so that South Carolina students can experience a successful transition from high school to postsecondary learning.

Best Practices: Paired Courses

In an effort to improve alignment between high school courses and entry-level college courses, teachers and administrators across South Carolina began to work together to ensure a seamless transition for students. In 2008, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (CHE) entered into a multiyear partnership with the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) to develop and deliver Paired Courses following the model described in *The South Carolina Course Alignment Project: Paired Courses Model* (EPIC, 2008). The goals of the project were to:

- improve high school graduation rates, reduce the need for remedial instruction in college, and improve college retention and graduation rates;
- use a statewide framework to support local solutions;
- strengthen faculty resources by creating regional networks of professional educators who can share ideas, collaborate, and modify their current policies and practices as they learn how to prepare all students for postsecondary success; and
- create clear pathways between high school and college coursework to reduce curriculum redundancy between high school and college.

These Paired Courses were intentionally designed as a sequential curriculum between the senior year of high school and the freshman year of college. In their design, Paired Courses are aligned to the Four Keys to College and Career Readiness, a model created by EPIC's founder and CEO, Dr. David Conley. The Four Keys (Conley, 2014) include Key Cognitive Strategies (Think), Key Content Knowledge (Know), Key Learning Skills and Techniques (Act), and Key Transition Knowledge and Skills (Go). In the 2008 version of the model, the last two Keys are referred to as Academic Behaviors and Contextual Skills, respectively (EPIC, 2008).

In 2008, key educators, policymakers and educational administrators nominated experienced teachers who would later be chosen for the design team. These teachers were nominated for their years of service to the state, their experience as instructors (often at more than one level of education—high schools, technical colleges, and four-

year institutions), and the recognition and awards they had earned. In January 2009, the teams assembled in Columbia, South Carolina, and began to design Paired Courses in sessions that lasted a day and a half. Outside consultants who had previously worked on a similar project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), accompanied EPIC staff and helped facilitate the design process. During the next ten weeks, participants met via video-conference technology with each other and EPIC staff every one to two weeks.

At the end of the design period, the teams presented 17 courses in English language arts, mathematics, biology, physics, and chemistry to the staff at CHE and EPIC. In the fall of 2009, South Carolina faculty implementers taught these 17 Paired Courses and, over that academic year, provided feedback on the courses. Project leaders used these reviews to modify and improve all 17 courses in the summer of 2010. The courses have been taught ever since. EPIC maintains a website where all the Paired Courses and their supporting documents are available for download: https://www.epiconline.org/what-we-do/Projects/SC-course-packets.dot During the 2012–2013 academic year, in an effort to continue the course review process, EPIC and CHE selected content experts to align the syllabi for high school mathematics and English language arts to the Common Core State Standards that had been previously adopted by the state. This alignment study is described in more detail below.

Lessons Learned:

1. Keep design team groups small. Six to eight members are sufficient.
2. If possible, bring in one or two consultants who have previously been successful in this type of course development work—not to direct the content of the courses, but to help facilitate the process during group collaboration.
3. Start the course design process with a one- or two-day face-to-face meeting that is later sustained over multiple weeks using videoconference equipment from each participant's local region. This approach will keep costs reasonable and progress continuous.
4. Once Paired Courses are implemented in high schools and institutions of higher education, it is important to regularly solicit feedback from the implementing faculty members to modify, update, and generally improve the Paired Courses as new ideas emerge.

Best Practices: Regional Meetings

The original focus of the South Carolina Course Alignment Project was to develop and distribute Paired Course materials across the state to classroom teachers who wanted to ensure that their students were prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. While participants in the project worked to attain this goal, a new emphasis emerged as a result of the feedback that project managers received through online surveys and regular correspondence with participants. The new focus was the development of faculty partnerships. Participants asked for help in finding and fostering partnerships because they recognized the wealth of information and professional development that resulted from these relationships. As a result, project managers from CHE and EPIC began to formalize these linkages.

Using expertise gained from managing other large-scale faculty recruitment projects, EPIC began this process by asking participants to nominate additional faculty members. Eventually, the search was narrowed to include faculty from key regions and subject areas. This type of recruitment is labor-intensive and requires daily attention to find key faculty in subjects and regions who will complete the partnerships. Each year, EPIC invited new faculty members to join the project until EPIC reached the maximum number that could be funded by the project budget. At one point, the participants in physics and chemistry asked if these two distinct subject groupings could be merged. High school faculty requested this merger because in many schools the same teacher is assigned to teach chemistry one year and physics the next. Postsecondary faculty readily agreed to the merger.

Based on feedback from the project participants, the annual meetings evolved into regional meetings in each of the four naturally occurring geographical regions of the state. Greenville, Columbia, Florence, and Charleston hosted the SC CAP regional workshops. Within the regional groups, subject-area subgroups coalesced in four subject areas: English, mathematics, physics and chemistry, and biology. With four subjects and regions, the project finalized the groups in a four-by-four approach for a total of 16 groups.

Finally, and again driven by requests from the faculty participants, project leaders invited administrators to attend an administrator regional meeting. Faculty participants noted that, although they understood and tried to implement the goals of the project, they ran up against policies and practices in their institutions that limited how far they could move toward full alignment with their partnerships across secondary and postsecondary settings. Once again, project managers listened and used the ideas

generated by the project participants and held four regional meetings for administrators. The design of this workshop included guest speakers recruited from the faculty participants in that region to educate the administrators about the barriers that project participants were experiencing. This approach helped the administrators, some of whom had originally nominated faculty participants for the project, understand how their own institutional practices limited full implementation of the project goals.

Lessons Learned:

1. Solicit ongoing feedback from participants.
2. Allow the project design to evolve by incorporating participant ideas and other lessons learned.
3. Recognize that faculty across institutions share many of the same concerns, barriers, and solutions.

Best Practices: Video Promotion

EPIC and CHE project staff agreed that some of the best acknowledgments of the successes of the SC CAP were coming from the faculty participants in their correspondence and online surveys. Project managers from both organizations developed a budget that would allow for the production of a video to promote the work of the SC CAP among other organizations and states. A South Carolina videographer captured the video and audio while EPIC staff members directed the videotaping, edited the raw video, wrote the narration, and produced the final product.

The outcome was a 12-minute video with the voices of faculty participants and their students describing how the SC CAP had improved teaching in the state. Dr. Amy Pope of Clemson University said, "I think the best thing that has come out of it is really an understanding of what we expect at each level—understanding what the high schools expect and what the great leap is in going to college." Leslie Hendrix of the University of South Carolina stated, "Being involved in the Course Alignment Project really made me aware of my students' skill levels and also their expectations for college. I emphasize the fact that students' success is in their own hands now (EPIC, 2011)."

The raw footage was used to create a second video of testimonials from the participants, who discussed more deeply how their own practices had improved. Later,

a third video was produced of a panel of six faculty participants who had been with the project for many years. In the video, they discussed how the project had helped them and their students to better succeed in preparation for postsecondary education. The videos have been used by CHE and EPIC in many other settings to show audiences how collaboration among secondary and postsecondary faculty can promote positive outcomes for students.

Lessons Learned:

1. Use authentic images and participant voices to tell the project's story.
2. Hire local partners for the video collection.
3. Keep the overall video short so it can be shown in many settings.

Best Practices: CCSS Alignment of Paired Courses

South Carolina adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in July 2010 along with a wave of support among the majority of states. This adoption was voluntary for each state when the Governors and Chief State School Officers, through their respective organizations (NGA, CCSSO), developed the CCSS collaboratively. At the time of this writing, South Carolina's Department of Education website states:

> Pursuant to Act 200 passed by the General Assembly and signed by the Governor in June 2014, Common Core will only be the basis for instruction and assessment in the 2014-15 school year; SC has initiated the process to develop new, high-level College and Career Ready standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics with the intent of putting those new standards in place for the 2015-16 school year (South Carolina Department of Education, 2014).

Among South Carolina legislators, support for the Common Core State Standards seems to be waning. Whatever the future of CCSS in South Carolina, the Commission on Higher Education requested that EPIC hire content experts in English language arts and mathematics during the 2012–2013 budget year to align the relevant Paired Courses to the CCSS. EPIC selected consultants from within and beyond South Carolina to align four high school Paired Courses (English 3, English 4, Precalculus, and Algebra II for Math for Technologies) to the adopted CCSS. EPIC later added the results of this alignment work to the packets of these four courses.

Lessons Learned:

1. Prepare alignment worksheets that are easy for faculty to use. They should be able to check each standard when they find alignment with the state standards in any of the course packet documents.
2. Using the logic that alignment consultants are chosen because they are experts in their fields, if any expert consultant finds alignment with a particular standard, that standard was reported as represented within the course.

Best Practices: Next Steps—Future of the Project

Beginning in 2014, EPIC will work with the newly created Center of Excellence for College and Career Readiness housed at Francis Marion University in order to transition project activities to the Center's control. The South Carolina Course Alignment Project, after six years in existence, is in a position to redefine its work and goals for the future.

As leaders of the Center of Excellence build networks around the state, they will profit from the rich base of participants who have collaborated in the SC CAP. When the Center staff conducts research on college and career readiness, they will have a ready supply of volunteers among the SC CAP participants. Whether these K–12 and postsecondary instructors implemented a Paired Course, benefitted from school visits, shared classroom equipment across institutions, or simply worked alongside colleagues who had participated in the SC CAP, they have an expanded view of what it takes to be college and career ready. The experiences of past project participants will pay dividends for future work in the field.

With their understanding of local and statewide needs, leaders of the new Center of Excellence will be able to guide conversations and encourage participants from the K–12 and postsecondary environments alike to make decisions that will promote college and career readiness. These are exciting times.

Lessons Learned:

1. Use successes from the past to guide the work in the future.
2. Capitalize on the rich network of those who have participated in the SC CAP to build even stronger networks.

Research Methodology

Recruitment and Nomination Processes

From the beginning of the design and implementation phases of the South Carolina Course Alignment Project in the 2009–2010 academic year, the participant recruitment process and frequency of recruiting have remained constant. EPIC and CHE sought nominations from university and technical college presidents, provosts, and department heads. At the secondary level, nominations came from school district superintendents, high school principals, and past project faculty participants. Project leaders solicited these nominations several times each year at project advisory group meetings, through annual online surveys and regular email, and through edWeb.net communications (described later in this report).

Project managers identified key gaps in participant clusters on an annual basis, looking for ways to foster stronger collaboration by inviting new members to join the project. The goal of this recruitment effort was to balance clusters by regional area, type of institution (high school versus college), and content area. Project managers also established a waiting list when clusters became full. The continued goal of the project is to have 16 active groups in the state in a four-region by four-subject design. (As mentioned previously, physics and chemistry are combined.)

Lessons Learned:

1. Maintain an active nomination process, seeking nominations three to four times throughout the year.
2. Identify gaps in groups by subject, region, and type of institution. Recruit strategically from the nomination list, noting that each year all participants should be invited to join again along with new recruits. Expect participants to leave and return to the project based on their projected job demands for the upcoming year.
3. Keep accurate records in a database that can be sorted by many different variables for each nominee (e.g., nominator and nominee contact information, subject, region, type of institution, and dates of correspondence).

Regional Groups

It has taken project staff many years to establish optimal demographic participation in the groups in order to ensure full representative coverage of the state. The current four-by-four design appears to be an effective design, with four subjects (mathematics, physics/chemistry, biology, and English) in four regions (Charleston, Columbia, Florence, and Greenville) for a total of 16 groups. The composition of each group seems to work best when 15–20% of the members are from four-year universities, 15–20% are from two-year technical colleges, and 60–70% are from high schools. EPIC invited members of the four subject groups within each region to participate in the annual regional meetings. As described previously, keeping the groups fully staffed across these three types of institutions is key to the success of each group.

Lessons Learned:

1. Keep compositions of each group balanced across the three types of institutions.
2. Hold regional meetings to accommodate each of the four subject groups in their home region.
3. Continue to strengthen groups that have fewer members in key demographics.

Capturing Communications Using edWeb.net

From the beginning of the project, most communications occurred via email, which proved efficient but not always optimal. One disadvantage of email conversations is that they are usually an exchange between just two participants. In the early years of the project, face-to-face meetings would often be replaced by one-on-one email exchanges, where no one else benefitted from the learning that was taking place.

Beginning in 2012, project staff members wanted to capitalize on social networking platforms in order to build a collaborative network for the SC CAP participants. EPIC staff members used the free networking site edWeb.net to create communities for the SC CAP participants. Project participants each belong to three communities: the community for the subject they teach, the community for the geographical area in which they live, and the overall SC CAP forum for all project members. It is the expectation that online discussions take place in open forums where others can comment and share.

During the 2012–13 academic year, 111 SC CAP participants signed up for these online communities. In the first year of use, most participants shared postings in their regional or subject-specific communities. The most active groups were the mathematics subject area (with more than 90 posts) and the Florence regional group (with almost 40 posts). During the second year of using edWeb.net for the project, fewer participants contributed to the site. The majority of new postings came in the general SC CAP forum that all participants can access.

On a year-end survey conducted in the summer of 2014, participants gave a mixed review of edWeb.net. Participants ranked the usefulness of the site on a scale from 1 (not helpful at all) to 10 (extremely helpful). The average ranking was 4.8, with a significant number of participants rating the usefulness of the site as extremely high (12%) or extremely low (19%). When asked to give suggestions for improving communication in the project, some participants noted that, as with other social media platforms, it is difficult to communicate with people one does not know. For that reason, they suggested meeting face-to-face on a more regular basis. Additionally, some thought that participation would increase on the website if organizers gave more frequent discussion prompts, and several people mentioned that email had been an effective mode of communication during previous years. One person remarked, "I am guilty of not using edWeb as much as I should. We all just need to keep communicating and encouraging each other."

Lessons Learned:

1. Online forums should be monitored and strengthened with regular content additions.
2. Though there is an element of camaraderie to be had in subject or regional communities, it may be easier for participants to track site activity if all postings occur in one centralized community.
3. Continue to solicit feedback from participants in order to determine the best means of communicating across the different groups.

Project Evaluation

Annual Surveys: Best Practices Learned From Faculty Over the Years

Since the project originated, leaders have strongly supported soliciting feedback from participants regarding their impressions of the project, the training they received, and the Paired Courses they were implementing. EPIC's 2010 report described the participants' responses to questions such as the following:

> One of the South Carolina Course Alignment Project goals is to improve high school-to-college alignment through the development and teaching of Paired Courses. Do you think the training you received as a pilot implementer and the documents you were provided helped you to meet this goal for your students? If yes, how have they helped you? If no, what did you need instead?

Regarding the training, all who provided reactions thought the training was an efficient and effective way to describe the project goals. Participants learned how to use the Paired Course documents and the reasons for the Paired Course design. Several pilot implementers would have preferred that more time be allocated during the trainings for discussion with their cluster partners to learn even more about how their content areas were taught by their partners (EPIC, 2010).

Answers to another survey question revealed a prevailing sentiment that persists to this day among project participants: "Most felt their introductions and developing relationships with their cluster partners were the most valuable part of the project" (EPIC, 2010). During the most recent regional meetings in 2014, participants reaffirmed this sentiment many times. The most important part of the project is human interaction.

Throughout these collaborative activities—regional trainings, cluster partnerships, class visits, and online communications—participants had the opportunity to share new strategies, course content, and different approaches to teaching. This collaboration is the heart of the South Carolina Course Alignment Project.

Lessons Learned:

1. Frequent input from participants will give project leaders direction on the course that the project should take.
2. Let the values of the project develop organically and over time.

Conclusion

The South Carolina Course Alignment Project was launched by staff at the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, Division of Academic Affairs, to promote their vision for college and career readiness in the state. Over the past six academic years, more than 200 faculty members in high schools, technical colleges, and universities have participated, and the Paired Courses model has been implemented in more than 200 South Carolina classrooms. Participating faculty members have contributed to annual workshops by advising leaders on content, helping to develop content, and leading discussions. Administrators at participating institutions have supported teaching faculty and advised the SC CAP leaders during workshops and advisory board meetings. Nearly all project participants have contributed to the project goals outside their normal duties, for little to no additional compensation. Why? Because South Carolina instructors see the Paired Courses model as the future of their state educational system. Aligning courses and collaborating with colleagues to change the course of education in the state will ultimately improve the academic and career outcomes of the students they teach.

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