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The Role of College and Career Readiness Reforms in
Supporting Work-Bound Students

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Abstract

States and districts across the country have experimented with various college and career readiness initiatives designed to help students complete the postsecondary education they need to succeed in the labor market. Yet how do teachers view their students' likely college capabilities following these efforts? Can the reforms help work-bound students who are unlikely to attend college? Or are there other strategies that educators and school leaders could use to better support these students? We examine these questions using the case of Florida, which is one of the pioneering states to implement a comprehensive, statewide alignment reform geared towards improving college and career readiness. The Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI) required high schools to administer the statewide community college placement test to mid-performing students in their junior year, and those scoring below college-ready were required to take a senior-year "college readiness and success" (CRS) course. We conducted a statewide survey of 225 teachers of CRS courses to learn more about the effectiveness of the reform according to those on the front-line tasked with implementing it. The findings provide insight from Florida's experience that may inform other states about where the reform is most effective, which students are poorly served, and how they might be better helped.

Keywords: college readiness, reform implementation, high school context

The Role of College and Career Readiness Reforms in Supporting Work-Bound Students

States and districts across the country have experimented with various college and career readiness initiatives designed to help students complete the postsecondary education they need to succeed in the labor market. Yet how do teachers view their students' likely college capabilities following these efforts? Can the reforms help work-bound students who are unlikely to attend college? Or are there other strategies that educators and school leaders could use to better support these students? We examine these questions using the case of Florida, which is one of the pioneering states to implement a comprehensive, statewide alignment reform geared towards improving college and career readiness. The Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI) required high schools to administer the statewide community college placement test to mid-performing students in their junior year, and those scoring below college-ready were required to take a senior-year "college readiness and success" (CRS) course. Alignment has been identified as one of the key methods for improving college and career readiness and potentially raising college completion (Achieve, 2014; Conley, 2007).

As in any educational reform, success largely depends on how teachers respond. Prior research finds that when teachers do not accept the reform or they take perfunctory actions to support it, little is accomplished (Spillane, 2006); therefore, it is important to examine whether teachers take initiative to support its success. We conducted a statewide survey of 225 teachers of college readiness courses to learn more about the effectiveness of the reform according to those on the front-line tasked with implementing it. The findings provide insight from Florida's experience that may inform other states about where the reform is most effective, which students are poorly served, and how they might be better helped.

What Teachers Tell Us About College and Career Readiness Reforms

Teachers think their high schools under-emphasize the importance of career readiness.

When teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of the FCCRI, the most notable difference was the higher effectiveness of the FCCRI in high schools that prioritized college preparation, but not in schools that prioritized career preparation. More teachers wanted their schools to increase their emphasis on career preparation than wanted increases in college preparation. This indicates that they wanted the FCCRI to serve all students, not just those who are college-bound.

Teachers report drawbacks to a college-focused definition of career readiness. Florida's Department of Education has adopted this definition of college and career ready, which forms the basis for the FCCRI:

Students are considered college and career ready when they have the knowledge, skills, and academic preparation needed to enroll and succeed in introductory college credit-bearing courses within an associate or baccalaureate degree program without the need for remediation (2014).

Like other prominent organizations (ACT, Achieve), the FCCRI targets the college-level academic skills, as measured in the community college placement test, which are seen as indicating students' preparation to meet the academic demands of college and the labor market. Students' future college success depends on these skills, and FCCRI assumes that career success also does.

Yet we find that teachers believe the FCCRI has defined "college and career readiness" too narrowly. Despite the rhetoric that college and career readiness are the same, teachers object to the implication that many of their students have no chance of success. This discouraging message poses problems in advising students who receive low scores on the placement test.

Indeed, in asserting that students must pass the placement test to benefit from college, the FCCRI implies that students with academic skills far below the college-readiness cutoff cannot expect to benefit from college, which is not true. Many occupational certificate programs do not require college-readiness to enter or succeed, and they lead to well-paid jobs (Rosenbaum, et al 2017).

Teachers perceive that many students will be unable to succeed in college, and college readiness reforms fail to offer any options for these lower-performing students.

Since this reform seeks to prepare students for their college and career futures, it is important to know what educational credentials teachers believe most of their students can attain. The FCCRI reform required that colleges offer CRS classes to prepare students for college and career success. Surveying teachers of these courses, we asked teachers whether most students in their CRS class could succeed at getting each level of credential--BA degree, associate degree, or certificate. Only 20% of teachers believe most of their students can attain a BA degree. In contrast, twice as many teachers (40%) think most of their students can finish an associate degree, and 49% believe most of their students can finish a certificate. Despite the FCCRI focus on readiness for BA degrees, very few teachers think most of their students can attain BA degrees, and most teachers believe that the majority of their students (51%) are not even able to earn even a certificate.

CRS classes are heterogeneous in terms of students' academic performance and college intentions, which poses an additional difficulty for helping students. Teachers often refer to student disengagement interchangeably with poor academic performance, "work-bound students," and "non-college-bound students." Teachers imply, and sometimes state, that many of their students are disengaged in CRS courses because they realize their poor prospects for college, and their college placement score made this more explicit. Contrary to the FCCRI

assumption that all students are motivated to prepare for college, teachers report that many students do not see college-level preparation as attainable for them, and neither FCCRI nor the school provides any evidence to reduce students' doubts.

For example, one English teacher explains, "it is very difficult to motivate the students who are our lowest scoring students to appreciate a class named 'College Readiness'...the title frustrates them, and they don't want to take the course seriously." Some students see college as beyond their reach, and teachers do not know how to motivate these students in their CRS courses. Similarly, another teacher explains "many of the students have no interest in being in school, especially in an English class to prepare them for college." A math teacher says "the majority of my students are not college bound," and they see no purpose in this course. Teachers struggle to motivate students who see college as beyond their reach.

Other teachers mention the difficulty of reaching students whose goals are unclear. Many of these teachers specifically advocate separating college-bound students and others. For example, one teacher wants the school to "only have the people who want to go to college in the [CRS] class," while another wants "this class NOT to be required." One teacher believes "we have populated the [college prep] class with the wrong students," who cannot see why they are in a "college prep" class.

College readiness reforms may further discourage work-bound students from considering postsecondary options.

One concern expressed by teachers is that the FCCRI suggests that college is not an option for students who do not score college-ready on the placement test. The FCCRI implies that students must pass the placement test to get any benefit from college, and that students who do not pass are not college-ready. When teachers say that most students cannot attain any college

credential, even a certificate, this may be because they believe passing the placement test is necessary to succeed in college, just as the FCCRI implies. Despite the FCCRI goal of college and career readiness for everyone, it also poses a high standard, which seems unattainable for many students. As noted above, the FCCRI states that students are only “college and career ready when they ...[can] succeed in introductory college credit-bearing courses within an associate or baccalaureate degree program.” Although the purpose of early placement testing is to identify and address areas of improvement before high school graduation, when the FCCRI gives students their test scores, many students conclude that college is not a viable option. Similarly, teachers expect many students will not attend college or not stay very long because their achievement is too far below the college-readiness level. Teachers think that a poor placement test score tells students that they should not expect to succeed in college. However, as we note below, entry into and success in college certificate programs in many fields often does not require passing the placement test.

What School Leaders Can Do to Improve Post-High School Outcomes for Underprepared Students

Think more broadly about the definition of “college and career readiness”

We discovered 3 meanings of career readiness which school leaders should consider when designing and implementing college and career readiness reform. First, the FCCRI defined career readiness as the same as college readiness, which some teachers found unattainable for many lower-performing students. The message that students need high academic skills to benefit from college is misleading. While the FCCRI claim is accurate for bachelor’s and associate degrees, which require college-level academic skills and passing the placement test, certificates often do not. In fact, even without passing the placement test, students can enter college

certificate programs (often without enrolling in remedial classes) and have high odds of getting credentials that qualify them for high-demand mid-skill jobs (Carnevale et al. 2012; Holzer, 2012; Jacobson and Mokher, 2010).

Second, teachers seek to improve career readiness without college, with lessons that present career information and teach practical skills for work-bound high school seniors (who do not plan to attend college). A math teacher taught bookkeeping skills, an English teacher taught writing business memos, and another teacher had students write reports about a career that interested them. Teachers report that they want to improve career options for all their students, even the students who cannot pass the placement test, going beyond the FCCRI goals. These teachers seek to increase career supports for students who do not have college ambitions. Many of these teachers call for more career courses in high schools, as suggested by Stone and Lewis (2012). One teacher says, “there could be more career readiness classes ... experiential learning would benefit our students more than test-taking skills.” Yet another believes that “a focus on their career path, rather than an insistence on a college path, would be far more efficient” for many of her students. One math teacher wants “to have a similar course specifically for career readiness, rather than simply college readiness.”

Third, teachers advocate preparing students for occupational programs that prepare students for careers in many occupations without demanding high academic skills. These programs do not require passing the placement test, although teachers are vague about what higher education alternatives fit these students. For example, one teacher asks for CRS classes to have “more effective and useful materials for developing post-high-school plans and preparing for a career.” Some teachers advocate for-profit colleges that make well-advertised claims to prepare students for careers, despite negative publicity and accusations of fraud. Perhaps

discouraged by the FCCRI claims about college-readiness standards, and the low salience of occupational certificates in community colleges. These teachers believe that many of their students may not be able to succeed in a public higher education program, and alternative instruction may motivate these students and improve their future careers. They realize the limits of a high school diploma, and they know about jobs that don't seem to require college academic skills, and they want "college and career readiness" to be defined more broadly to serve the students who do not pass the placement test. They see career readiness as career knowledge and job skills that would enable students to enter the labor market without first having to meet the college readiness cut-score.

Increase awareness of occupational programs at community colleges

The FCCRI gives a misleading message that prevents teachers from seeing that community colleges offer options that do not require scoring college-ready. However, community college certificates, which often do not require placement tests may be good college options for students who do not test college-ready. Certificates in many fields have low academic requirements (often 8th to 10th grade level, and sometimes less), and students' success at certificates is unrelated to academic skills (Carnevale, et al. 2012; Rosenbaum, et al. 2017). Although career certificate programs have grown dramatically in the past decade, they remain poorly understood. Community colleges rarely state this clearly, and policies, including the FCCRI, often state the opposite—that students must have "college-level skills" to benefit from college programs.

While such occupational programs are widely advertised by for-profit colleges, community college advertisements and websites often emphasize BA-transfer programs for young students. When we (the authors) examined community college websites to discover such

occupational programs, we had difficulty finding them. They often require several links, sometimes hidden under the heading of "adult education," which young students think does not pertain to them. Even though we know how these programs work, the stated requirements were difficult for us to interpret, so it is not surprising that high school teachers, counselors and administrators do not understand these options.

These occupational programs and many others offer employment opportunities with good pay, and perhaps higher degrees. Analysis of national data indicates that many students with low test scores attain certificates and have similar earnings as students with higher scores (Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2017). Moreover, the earnings distributions of BAs and certificate holders overlap a great deal—one quarter of certificate holders earn more than most BAs (Carnevale et al., 2012). To examine the outcomes of sample sub-BA programs, we analyzed Florida's Smart College Choice website. This website uses Florida's integrated data system to provide useful information about the requirements and career outcomes of various college programs. Unfortunately, teachers and students are rarely aware of this information. We computed statewide career outcomes by grouping various occupational programs in three categories: associate degree programs, career certificate programs, and college-credit certificate programs. The first set of programs requires scoring college-ready on the placement test, the second set mostly does not, and the third set of programs varies by field. Yet we find that employment outcomes are often similar across all three sets of programs.

Therefore, this information could make a big difference. We have previously proposed creating college scorecards with student outcome data to demonstrate that certificates and applied degrees are good options for promoting career success (Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2016). We suspect teachers would be eager to know this information and to inform

students about these career options that do not require testing college-ready. Contrary to FCCRI claims that students must pass the placement test to benefit from college, these college programs offer “career readiness” without “college readiness.” If students realized this, it is likely that many "work-bound" students could attend and greatly benefit from community college too.

The FCCRI was an impressive effort to improve alignment between high schools and colleges. However, its narrow conceptions of “career readiness” discouraged many students and undermined its effectiveness. Reforms like the FCCRI could better live up to the stated goal of supporting college and career readiness if it included more career options for all students.

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