

RETHINKING 12TH GRADE

PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE *BEFORE* COLLEGE

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Jobs for the Future and the Community College Research Center convened educators, policymakers, and researchers to discuss strategies for increasing college readiness and success by redesigning the senior year and improving the transition to postsecondary education. This brief highlights key issues and recommendations that grew out of the event “Making the Most of 12th Grade in the Common Core Era: Ensuring Every Student Is Ready for College Before College.”

THE ISSUE: COLLEGE READY OR NOT?

The problem is big—and about to get bigger.

It is well known that many students graduate high school unprepared to enter college or start a career. It is becoming increasingly well known that a large proportion of students who do enter college are required to take at least one developmental, or remedial, course before they can take classes in that subject for credit. Unfortunately, remediation is often a barrier to completion, according to [research by the Community College Research Center](#). The vast majority of young people who start community college in developmental math or English coursework get stuck there (see box, “The Numbers”). Less than one-third of these students graduate, costing time and money they can’t recoup. With postsecondary credentials required for most family-supporting careers, the loss to our economy is significant. Many employers report leaving jobs unfilled because they can’t find qualified employees.

These are the issues that new college and career readiness standards and assessments for K-12 public schools have been designed to address. Every state has adopted a set of standards in English and math, intended to raise the bar for all students, outlining the knowledge

and skills they need to be prepared for success in 21st-century college and careers. Almost all states will start testing 11th graders with college-readiness assessments based on the standards in 2014.

The Numbers

These statistics come from the Community College Research Center, which focuses on issues related to improving student success and institutional performance.

Students who need 1+ remedial course in college

- > Community college students: 68%
- > Open-access four-year college students: 40%

Students who graduate community college within eight years, by need for remediation

- > Students needing remediation who graduate: 28%
- > Students not needing remediation who graduate: 43%

States with transition curricula

- > State developed: 8
- > Some schools and districts have developed: 21
- > In progress: 9

“This is going to put a lot of pressure onto states. We need to pay attention to particular populations who have had a difficult time getting over current standards—English language learners, Latino, African-American, low-income, students with disabilities. Solutions need to attend to their diverse array of needs.”

—Joel Vargas,
Jobs for the Future

In 45 states and the District of Columbia, schools are using the Common Core State Standards, which were developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Other states have created their own standards. (It is not yet known how many of these states will develop their own college-readiness assessments.) Schools and districts across the country are working intensely to

institute curricula that implement the higher standards and to build teacher capacity to help students meet them.

Nobody can predict how many students will be deemed college ready by the new tests. But it is likely that far too many will be deemed *not* ready, especially over the next few years as school systems stretch to help students meet higher standards. These students will be disproportionately low-income and minority youth, English language learners, and students whose parents did not attend college.

PROGRESS SO FAR: THE PROLIFERATION OF TRANSITION COURSES

A surprising number of states are already taking steps to respond to these new realities—and opportunities. The most common strategy so far is to offer interventions in the form of “transition courses,” designed to help at-risk 12th graders make it over the bar by graduation.

Seven states and the District of Columbia have implemented statewide transition curricula initiatives for high school seniors who otherwise are likely to need remedial math, reading, or writing when they enter college, [according to the Community College Research Center](#). The states are Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Some schools and districts in twenty-one additional states have created their own. Nine other states are in the early stages of designing interventions.

Transition curricula vary tremendously by location. They typically include a course, online tutorials, or other programs designed to help students avoid remediation in college. They include face-to-face and online formats. More are offered in math than in English. Some include instruction in “college knowledge,” such as study skills and tips on navigating campus resources like academic support or financial aid.

[The Southern Regional Education Board](#) has been a leader in working with states to change the way students prepare for life after graduation. Before there was a Common Core, SREB created a comprehensive college-readiness policy agenda; one important piece was transition courses for high school juniors or seniors who were assessed as not college ready. Today the organization is working with 16 states to implement these courses.

SREB also has developed [model transition courses—available online free of charge](#) to any state, district, school, or individual that wishes to use them. The curricula, called Literacy Ready and Math Ready, are best suited for the middle range of students, rather than those who are severely behind.

In Tennessee, any high school student required to take a “bridge” course in math because of a low score on the ACT (under 19) may choose [the SAILS program](#), which is expanding this year from a small pilot to nearly 9,000 students across the state. Developed with high school and college faculty, SAILS consists of blended learning lessons (online instruction in a group, with teacher support) in key math competencies that students need for college success. The semester-long course is free. When completed, students may take a tuition-free college math class while still in high school for dual credit. Students who earn all five competencies are guaranteed entry into college-level math at any public postsecondary institution in the state.

“The 12th-grade interventions are absolutely critical for those students who are not on track. It is in many ways their last chance.”

—Cheryl Blanco,
Southern Regional Education Board

“It’s a period of invention in many ways. It seems helpful to know if you are college ready or not, but it may be more helpful to know there’s something clear you can do about it.”

—Elisabeth Barnett,
Community College Research Center

CASE STUDY: California Early Assessment Program

In California, high school students who wish to know their college-readiness status before college have had the option of participating in the Early Assessment Program since 2006. The students take an “augmented” version of the California Standards Tests that is given to all high school juniors. At the beginning of senior year, they find out if they are considered “ready,” “conditionally ready,” or “not ready” for credit-bearing college courses.

All college-ready students are guaranteed enrollment—without remediation—at any California State University and 70 community colleges.

A statewide transition course called the Expository Reading and Writing Course for those “conditionally ready” is offered in nearly half of the state’s 1,300 comprehensive high schools and alternative schools. Passing the year-long course, which was developed by CSU English faculty and high school teachers and administrators, makes students officially college ready. Modules have themes that are particularly engaging for teens, such as: racial profiling, good food/bad food, the value of life, bullying, and the books *Into the Wild* and *1984*.

In order to better prepare younger students to reach higher standards by high school, California is designing a curriculum, based on the transition course, to start teaching analytical reading, writing, and thinking more systematically from grades 7 through 12.

Because all of these interventions are relatively new, no rigorous research has been conducted on their effectiveness. But findings from some programs appear promising, according to Elisabeth Barnett of CCRC.

ADDITIONAL SOLUTIONS NEEDED: INTERVENTIONS FOR THOSE FARTHEST BEHIND

The least has been done so far for the students with the greatest needs. The question of what will happen to those farthest behind is a major concern. Educators and policymakers predict that dropout rates are likely to increase once large numbers of students are told they

of helping students deemed not college ready to catch up. A critical piece of the puzzle is to break down longstanding barriers between the K-12 and higher education sectors. Their collaboration is essential to solving this problem, especially given that some colleges are reducing developmental education offerings and others are redesigning courses in hopes of making them more effective.

“We have seen that the more at-risk students concurrently enroll (in college courses while in high school)—even if they don’t successfully complete the course—that helps drive confidence, increases postsecondary enrollment, and first-year completion.”
—*Emmy Glancy, Colorado Department of Higher Education*

A broader range of interventions will be needed, including those that start at the beginning of high school or even in middle school. Growing evidence shows that acceleration is more motivating than remediation for struggling students from low-income and minority backgrounds. Several school designs feature these opportunities, including [early college high schools](#) and dual enrollment programs, each with intensive supports.

Innovative solutions being developed for 12th grade and earlier in high school should learn from innovations in accelerated remediation in community colleges—and vice-versa. Many colleges are redesigning developmental

“We don’t have very good evidence and knowledge about what to do with students who are very far behind. And that’s very worrisome. Because we do see some states limiting the amount of support incoming community college students can get.”

—*Katherine Hughes, The College Board*

are not “college ready.” Students who stick it out through high school may not get a diploma or continue to be placed in remedial courses in college until they can prove on a test that they are prepared. This could have a dramatic impact on college going and college completion

Much work must be done—as soon as possible—to develop effective methods

“In the past, K-12 reform often had trouble engaging higher education. Some past efforts . . . were a little like one hand clapping . . . But all of this has changed. We are now in a moment with great potential for powerful and creative reform.”

—Richard Kazis,
Jobs for the Future

based on the idea that re-teaching traditional high school math in developmental classes may not be appropriate for all students. Instead, students who struggled with algebra through high school—and are not planning to pursue a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) career—may find statistics or quantitative reasoning to be more beneficial.

The Dana Center is also designing a year-long 12th-grade math course in quantitative reasoning that would bridge high school and college and bear dual credit. While this course is intended to supplement, not replace, existing high school math requirements, it raises the question of whether there might be reasonable alternatives for students facing a history of difficulty in Algebra II. The rationale is that these 12th-grade courses would be equally rigorous as the traditional senior-year trigonometry or pre-calculus and be less of a barrier to college for many who want to enroll in non-STEM fields.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for changes in state and federal policy came from the “Making the Most of 12th Grade in the Common Core Era” discussion in Washington, DC, and interviews with Jobs for the Future staff.

STATE POLICY

Richard Kazis, JFF’s senior vice president, notes several ways that states should expand their efforts to increase college and career readiness for those who will not score proficiently on the new tests:

- > **Ensure that all public high schools offer 12th-grade interventions** for students who are assessed as not college ready.

education—or considering new approaches—to help more students move on more quickly to credit-bearing courses.

At the [University of Texas at Austin, the Dana Center](#) is working with the state’s 50 community colleges to redesign developmental math to be more relevant to college-level courses and careers.

The new approaches are based on the idea that re-teaching traditional high school math in developmental classes may not be appropriate for all students. Instead, students who struggled with algebra through high school—and are not planning to pursue a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) career—may find statistics or quantitative reasoning to be more beneficial.

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- > **Continue and expand research on transition courses and other interventions** to increase the knowledge base about what works for students and why.
- > **Encourage schools and districts implementing transition courses to pursue a comprehensive model** like the one designed by the Southern Regional Education Board.
- > **Develop a comprehensive college and career readiness strategy that includes intensive supports**, beginning before senior year, for students who are identified as likely to fall short of proficiency on the college and career readiness assessments.
- > **Design incentives for partnerships between K-12 systems and public postsecondary institutions to collaborate on developing, testing, evaluating, and revising strategies** to help all students become college ready—and experience college expectations—before they enroll in postsecondary programs.

FEDERAL POLICY

Joel Vargas, vice president of JFF’s High School Through College programs, notes three ways the federal government could play a role in encouraging better transitions:

- > **Encourage the K-12 and higher education sectors to collaborate on increasing college and career readiness.** The federal government could offer and align incentives in the congressional reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act.
- > **Promote innovative approaches to improve college and career readiness, especially for underserved populations.** Federal innovation funds such as the U.S. Department of Education’s i3 and Race to the Top programs could spur research and development into effective interventions for the students who are farthest behind.
- > **Help high school teachers and college instructors better support their students.** The federal government could offer incentives in the congressional reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including Title II, to encourage educators to embed supports for students struggling with the transition from high school to college.

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

“Making the Most of 12th Grade in the Common Core Era” was a first conversation about this important challenge and opportunity. The following are some important questions that educators and policymakers will be facing over the next year:

- > Will high schools grant diplomas to students who are deemed not college ready by their state’s college-readiness assessment? Will colleges restrict access to these students?
- > What are the tradeoffs of using multiple indicators of college readiness (e.g., passing a transition course) rather than a single test?
- > How can transition courses enrich subject matter and instruction to better engage students who so far have struggled to master college-ready skills?
- > What are the most effective uses of technology in preparing below-grade-level students for college and career success?
- > Is it appropriate to provide high school students who have not succeeded in pre-college math with an alternative math pathway to non-general-education college credentials, such as statistics or quantitative reasoning?
- > How can the high school and postsecondary reform movements align most effectively and efficiently to reduce the need for remediation before college—and what incentives can policymakers provide?

RESOURCES

These publications highlight national and state efforts to improve college readiness and success for all students. They focus on readiness assessments, interventions for underprepared students, developmental education innovations, and policies that support promising approaches. For additional resources, see our full [recommended reading list](#).

Community College Research Center

- > [Reshaping the College Transition: Early College Readiness Assessments and Transition Curricula in Four States \(2013\)](#)
- > [Reshaping the College Transition: States That Offer Early College Readiness Assessments and Transition Curricula \(2013\)](#)

Jobs for the Future

- > [Early College High Schools Get Results \(2012\)](#)
- > [Rewarding Dual Enrollment in Performance-based Funding Formulas: How States Can Create Incentives for College to High School Partnerships \(2013\)](#)
- > [Study of Early Assessment and Early Intervention Models Authorized by HB 3468, 82nd Texas Legislature 2011 \(2012\)](#)

LearningWorks

- > [Changing Equations: How Community Colleges Are Re-thinking College Readiness in Math \(2013\)](#)

Southern Regional Education Board

- > [Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion: Transitional Courses for College and Career Readiness \(2013\)](#)
- > [SREB Readiness Courses: Transition to College and Careers \(2013\)](#)

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.

EXPERTS

The following educators, researchers, and policy advisors participated in the conversation convened by JFF and CCRC. More information about their backgrounds can be found on the list of [biographies](#).

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