

Developing and Using College Readiness Courses

I. What Are College Readiness Courses?

What purpose do college readiness courses serve in high school?

Imagine if a major car manufacturer had to significantly retool many of the auto parts provided by its suppliers before they could be used in the production of vehicles, then passed that cost on to the consumer. If consumers found out what was happening, they would likely think, "What a waste!" And they would think twice about supporting that company with their purchasing dollars.

Unfortunately, a similar phenomenon happens all the time in education. According to Complete College America, 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and nearly 20 percent of those entering four-year universities are unprepared to engage in college-level work in reading, writing and mathematics.¹ These students waste valuable time (and money) on remedial classes before they can enroll in credit-bearing courses.

Tracked into semesters or years of remedial coursework, students who assumed that their high school diploma and college admission attested to their readiness become disheartened and never make it to credit-bearing courses. Fewer than one in 10 students who start in remedial courses graduate from a community college within three years, and slightly more than one-third complete bachelor's degrees in six years.² These statistics are even worse for minority and low-income students. By contrast, when a student reaches college readiness by the end of high school, he/she enters college with a significantly greater chance of ultimately completing a credential or degree program.

Just as automobile manufacturers have figured out how to work closely with suppliers so that they produce auto parts to exacting specifications, many state K-12 and higher education systems are jointly designing and implementing readiness courses. Readiness courses are courses that are delivered in high school and designed specifically to help students who are not yet college ready reach readiness before they start college. Getting more students ready before their first day on campus can have a life-changing impact on collegiate success and completion—and students' long-term prospects.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This is the fourth in a series of briefs that provide an introduction to important areas for K-12/higher education collaboration and alignment. Each brief includes basic information, practical advice, vignettes based on real state experiences and a list of resources for additional information. The other briefs are:

- BRIEF 1: Achieving the Benefits of K-12/Higher Education Alignment.
- BRIEF 2: Defining College and Career Readiness.
- BRIEF 3: Adopting New College- and Career-Ready Assessments.
- BRIEF 5: Aligning Gateway College Courses.
- BRIEF 6: Redesigning Educator Preparation Programs.



K-12/higher education alignment is essential to state and institutional efforts to improve both college and career readiness and postsecondary completion. This series of briefs, exploring a host of alignment issues, is intended for K-12 and higher education policymakers, administrators, practitioners and advocates. The briefs draw on the experience of leading states working on alignment between these two sectors primarily through the national networks of [Core to College](#) and the [College and Career Readiness Partnership](#).



The promise of authentic implementation of college- and career-ready standards, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), is that many more students will move from kindergarten through 12th grade on a trajectory that ensures college readiness by high school graduation. But it will take time to reach this goal, and fulfilling it requires major efforts by both K–12 and higher education stakeholders. In the meantime, designing and implementing effective readiness courses will be an important strategy for increasing the number of students who enter college ready to do college-level work.

What is higher education's role in the work?

Higher education institutions are taking a more active and collaborative role with their K–12 colleagues in high school strategies supporting readiness. Postsecondary leaders recognize that helping students achieve college readiness prior to high school graduation ultimately increases college retention and completion rates. Postsecondary involvement often begins with collaborating on defining readiness and then contributing to the development of readiness assessments. The two national consortia supporting assessments aligned with the CCSS have worked with higher education faculty and administrators to ensure that the tests are rigorous and that scores are set to appropriately reflect college readiness.

Even deeper involvement is surfacing across the country as higher education institutions are working hand in hand with K–12 teachers on designing and delivering readiness courses in high school for students who have not yet tested as college ready. Higher education can bring to the partnership the expertise of faculty who teach first-year courses to help ensure that readiness course content is aligned to what students will need to succeed. Higher education can also endorse the courses and promote their use in high schools. This collaboration can extend to jointly implementing dual enrollment programs and expanding Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) offerings. Higher education can support the necessary professional development related to the delivery of the courses, monitor the outcomes of the courses, and participate in the refinement of courses based on pilots and experience. Through the process of designing and delivering these courses, high school teachers better understand what is necessary for students to reach readiness, and college faculty emerge more familiar with the realities of the high school experience. Both are better equipped to ensure the successful transition of students into and through college gateway courses.

COLLEGE READINESS COURSES: MULTIPLE APPROACHES

Different types of college readiness courses (sometimes called transition or bridge courses) meet differing needs:

- **COLLEGE READINESS/TRANSITION**—courses offered in high school, usually during the senior year, to help students who have not already met a readiness standard achieve readiness prior to high school graduation.
- **ADVANCED PLACEMENT/INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE**—courses/programs offered in high school allowing students to explore college-level content. The courses/programs are accompanied by recognized assessments. At certain score levels, student can often qualify for college credit.
- **DUAL/CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT**—courses offered through collaboration between high schools and colleges for college credit. These courses give high school students a taste of the rigors of college coursework.
- **REMEDIAL/DEVELOPMENTAL**—courses generally offered in college and sometimes in high school, usually for no college credit, providing underprepared students a pathway to credit-bearing courses.

II. Practical Advice for Developing and Implementing a Readiness Course Strategy

A number of states have made progress in developing and implementing a readiness course strategy. Colorado has focused on numerous policies that attack the readiness issue in multiple ways, including by promoting dual enrollment, expanding AP and IB offerings, designing and developing readiness courses, and redefining developmental education. The following advice, based on the experiences of leading states, can inform and support the efforts of states seeking to establish their own readiness course strategies.

1. Create a team, comprised of high school teachers who teach upper-level courses and higher education faculty who teach entry-level gateway courses, to lead the selection or design of college readiness courses to be used in high school. Engage teachers and faculty broadly during the process.

Teacher and faculty ownership of the courses is critical to their success, and efforts to create these courses must ensure that educators are involved at all stages. Teachers and faculty members on a team dedicated to the development and implementation of the courses not only support the work but also become powerful advocates for it among their colleagues. The team should be willing to explore existing readiness courses (see examples in Section III on page 4) as well as the option of designing something new.

2. Clearly identify the students who will be able to benefit most from each type of course.

As described in the sidebar on page 2, different varieties of college readiness courses meet different needs. States should identify those students who will benefit the most from each type and, perhaps in some cases, limit participation to targeted groups of students. For example, some states, like Tennessee, limit participation in readiness courses to students who are within a certain number of points of readiness as measured by a specific exam. Some states, like Colorado and Ohio, limit participation in dual enrollment based on a student's readiness to do college-level work. In this way, states hope to ensure both that students who are already at a high level of college readiness do not waste their 12th-grade year and that students who are behind receive the more intensive intervention they need rather than being frustrated in a class that they are not able to tackle.

3. Ensure that courses count toward high school course-taking requirements. Make students (and parents) aware that courses are rigorous and designed to lead to college readiness.

One way to ensure the success of readiness courses is to specify that they count toward meeting high school course-taking requirements. If schools offer a readiness course as an elective that does not qualify as meeting a graduation requirement, students are unlikely to take it seriously. This problem is worse for targeted students, such as those assessed below readiness levels at 11th grade. These students need every motivation to enroll and succeed in the transition course, including assurance that the course fulfills their senior-year requirement. Making such a course mandatory for the students who need it also may be useful. In addition, to manage student expectations, the course should be billed as rigorous preparation for college-level work. If students think that the course is remedial in nature, they may enroll thinking that it will be easy and then have difficulty succeeding.



4. Align courses to the state's college and career readiness standards. Be willing to ensure that successful course completion will result in a student entering college remediation free in the specific subject.

If a state has adopted college and career readiness standards (either the CCSS or other state-specific readiness standards), then the course materials should align to the standards that are most relevant to the course. The value of a readiness course, if properly aligned to college readiness standards, lies in its ability to serve as an indicator that the student is ready for college-level work. Ideally, college placement policies in an aligned system should explicitly specify that those who successfully complete a readiness course are not required to take remedial courses or even be retested in that content area. For example, students who score "conditionally ready" on the California State University (CSU) Early Assessment Program (EAP) can be fully ready by taking and passing the appropriate readiness course in their senior year.

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5. Design and deliver quality professional development for teachers who deliver the readiness courses.

Just as high schools and postsecondary systems need to design and implement readiness courses carefully, they also need to ensure that those who teach them receive appropriate professional development. Here, too, is another opportunity for cross-sector engagement: K–12 and higher education faculty can work together to develop and deliver high-quality teacher professional development specifically aligned to the selected or created readiness courses. Robust professional development is a key component of the implementation of readiness courses, including those developed by CSU and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

III. Actions in States: California, Tennessee and Southern Regional Education Board

California State University Early Assessment Program

In the early 2000s, California passed legislation that sought ways for higher education institutions to take advantage of the large investment that the state was making in K–12 testing. In response, the CSU system developed its EAP by taking the basic California high school assessment and adding selected questions in English and mathematics aimed at determining college readiness. These additions allowed the assessment to meet criteria established by CSU faculty, making the test a more reliable measure of college readiness.

Additionally, the EAP project engaged faculty in developing an expository reading and writing course for delivery in high school, intended to improve students' English knowledge and skills directly related to success in college. The course is designed to meet the needs of students who test as "conditionally ready" on the EAP assessment, with an emphasis on nonfiction texts and a focus on expository, analytical and argumentative reading and writing. Early research shows that the course increases student skills in reading comprehension, expository writing and independent thinking; students taking the course are also scoring higher on the CSU English placement test.

CSU recognized that the success of the course depended on the skills of the teachers delivering the content. Accordingly, CSU faculty developed the necessary teacher professional development program and materials, which are now offered in collaboration with the county offices of education. More than 600 high schools in California are currently using the course; more than 9,500 teachers were trained in course delivery between 2004 and 2013.

Tennessee: Bridge Math and SAILS

In Tennessee, all students take the ACT in their junior year. However, multiple years of test data showed that, as a whole, Tennessee students systematically performed substantially below the national average in meeting the ACT definition of college readiness. In response, Tennessee adopted legislation requiring four years of math as a high school graduation requirement and designated the Bridge Math course to meet the criteria for the fourth-year course. The Bridge Math course was adopted in 2010 and targets 12th-grade students who score 19 or below on the ACT.

Beginning in 2011, the state integrated the content of the Bridge Math course with the MyMathLab online education software program.³ This integration parallels the state's use of MyMathLab in remedial education at community colleges. The integrated, online approach is known as SAILS (Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support) and was originally developed by Chattanooga State Community College in collaboration with Red Bank High School in 2010. State policy specifies that students who successfully complete the five competencies of the integrated course are considered college ready. High school students who complete the SAILS course are eligible to take dual enrollment courses. College students who complete it earn college credit for their work. The SAILS program is now available to high schools statewide. During the 2014–15 academic year, it is expected to serve more than 13,000 students.

Southern Regional Education Board readiness courses

The SREB readiness courses are designed to assist students in the middle range of readiness—those 11th graders who are neither several grades behind nor prepared for postsecondary studies. In 2011, SREB began working with five states to develop two courses to address the readiness gap: Math Ready and Literacy Ready. To develop the courses, SREB established teams of K–12 teachers, higher education faculty, state agency personnel and national experts. The teams worked to draft the course units, which were circulated to 16 states and additional experts for review and comment. After multiple rounds of review, pilot testing and revisions, the teams finalized and SREB published the courses in October 2013. Additional field testing in more than 150 high schools was conducted in 2014–15.

SREB is working with Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina and West Virginia to implement the courses statewide in 2015–16. Other states, including Texas and Washington, have also used the courses, in some cases creating their own versions of Math Ready and Literacy Ready. SREB offers teacher training for schools interested in implementing these courses through the Readiness Courses Institute each summer. The courses have been adopted by high schools throughout the nation and are available as a free download from the SREB website (www.SREB.org/Ready) or on iTunes U.



Endnotes

1. Complete College America. (April 2012). Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere. www.completecollege.org/docs/CCA-Remediation-final.pdf.
2. Ibid.
3. MyMathLab is a product of Pearson Education, Inc.

Resources

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