

Aligning Gateway College Courses

I. What Are Gateway Courses that Build on College-Ready Standards?

Why consider redesigning gateway courses?

The promise of new college- and career-ready standards is that the students who master them are better prepared to succeed in postsecondary education or work. These students can go deeper with mathematical concepts in college algebra, statistics, and other math and science courses, and they have the reading and writing skills to engage with complex texts in English composition and humanities courses. The implication for postsecondary faculty is exciting: Students can start on day one equipped with the knowledge and skills to succeed with college-level content.

Helping faculty visualize how teaching and learning in their "gateway" (i.e., entry-level) college courses could change with the arrival of better prepared students can build support for K-12 college- and career-ready standards. It also can help faculty see links between new K-12 standards and state and institutional efforts to improve degree and credential completion at the postsecondary level.

At the same time, redesigned college gateway courses can smooth a student's transition from K-12 to higher education without "watering down" college-level coursework. Although gateway courses cannot align with college- and career-ready standards (because the standards are for grades K-12), the lessons and assignments in these courses can build on what students educated under the standards know and can do. In many cases, this rethinking can improve the quality of postsecondary classes. For example, a Tennessee faculty team recently redesigned gateway math courses to reflect mastery of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); the team writes that "in the age of Common Core State Standards for Mathematics, students expect mathematics courses to be focused on problem-solving, modeling of authentic contexts, and conceptual understanding, yet many of our College Algebra topics are taught without these considerations."¹ For these math faculty, better integrating such skills into college gateway courses offers an opportunity to improve both students' K-12 to higher education transitions and the quality of the math courses they teach.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This is the fifth 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 4: Developing and Using College Readiness 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](#).



WHAT IS A GATEWAY COURSE?

This brief uses the definition of a gateway course established in a [joint statement by leading college completion advocacy organizations](#): “the first college-level or foundation courses for a program of study. Gateway courses are for college credit and apply to the requirements of a degree.”

Gateway courses are distinct from developmental (also called remedial) courses, which are not credit bearing and are designed to prepare students for successful completion of gateway courses.

To a general audience, gateway courses are more recognizable by their course names—frequently titles like English Composition or College Algebra—or by informal descriptions like freshman English.

Reflecting the flexibility and campus autonomy of most states’ higher education systems, gateway courses are often determined locally and may therefore not be universal across institutions or campuses.

What is the current landscape of gateway course redesign?

Research shows that gateway course completion is a critical milestone for students’ postsecondary progress toward degrees. A set of reforms known collectively as the “completion agenda”—aimed at increasing graduation rates and degree attainment—has brought gateway courses into greater focus. In January 2014, the White House introduced more than 100 new commitments from institutions and campuses to “expand college opportunity,” including 22 state commitments to improve gateway course success.²

Postsecondary educators often discuss gateway courses, the first credit-bearing courses in a program of postsecondary study, in relation to the noncredit-bearing developmental or remedial college courses that precede them. Fewer than a quarter of community college students, and only a third of four-year students, placed in remediation will ever go on to complete their gateway courses.³ Because remediation is such an obstacle to degree completion, many initiatives across the country seek to eliminate separate remedial courses and address students’ remedial needs in the context of the gateway course itself through the use of co-requisite models and other similar approaches. These approaches provide students the support they need to succeed and significantly improve student persistence.⁴

II. Practical Advice for Approaching Gateway Course Redesign

A number of states have made progress toward redesigning gateway courses. The following advice, based on the experiences of some of these leading states, can inform and support the efforts of states and institutions seeking to engage in gateway course redesign.

1. Understand the context for the work.

The process of how institutions of higher education create syllabi and course content for gateway courses is not a mystery. Disciplinary departments, chairs of English and mathematics, faculty members, and faculty associations are all involved in content development. Entire states or clusters of institutions likely already have in place articulation agreements that equate certain courses and ensure that a student who takes a course at one institution can get credit for it at another. These agreements allow alignment efforts to focus on key courses that can be identified as being offered on a widespread basis across multiple campuses. These are the courses, like Freshman English and College Algebra, that almost all students take early in their college careers. They are the courses that, if properly redesigned, can lead to greater success among the students that take them. Alignment initiatives should draw from the people and associations that typically engage in the process of course development.

2. Integrate multiple policy goals in the redesign work.

College- and career-ready standards are not the only change with consequences for gateway courses and the faculty who teach them. Examples of other policy and practice shifts and mandates that might influence gateway course redesign and faculty buy-in include:

- **Co-requisite remediation:** Allowing students who participate in remedial coursework to receive additional support concurrent to—rather than as a prerequisite for—their gateway coursework.
- **Alternate math pathways:** Rethinking mathematics prerequisites and requirements for degrees in different disciplines (e.g., replacing College Algebra with statistics/quantitative reasoning).
- **Competency-based adaptations:** Redesigning general education requirements broadly in the context of competency-based models.

States' or institutions' redesign processes, and resulting resources, should be both informed by and respectful of these other expectations—particularly those mandated by the state or system—for gateway course faculty.

3. Secure faculty leadership.

Faculty who teach gateway courses are the most likely to experience both the challenges of underprepared students and the pressure to improve gateway course outcomes in the interest of supporting increased college completion. Any gateway course redesign should ensure that these faculty lead and support the efforts. Institutions can identify faculty who support new college- and career-ready standards and who understand the benefits of higher expectations for K–12 students. Faculty in many states are already involved in alignment efforts, such as serving on committees to prepare for the new aligned assessments. These engaged faculty are prime candidates to lead gateway course redesign.

4. Create incentives for adopting redesigned syllabi and materials.

Academic freedom is a tradition at higher education institutions. In the context of gateway course redesign, it usually means that the state, system or institution cannot mandate a syllabus for postsecondary courses. In other words, redesigned gateway course materials are resources, not policy. Model syllabi, lessons and other materials need to be attractive and easy to implement for faculty to adopt at scale. A good course redesign plan will consider ways to create incentives or ease the path for faculty adoption, possibly by offering professional development sessions to accompany the materials or stipends for faculty willing to pilot redesigned syllabi and materials and share thoughts to improve them. As the first adopters begin to see and share their success with the new materials, they will become the most effective marketers.

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5. Productively address faculty interest in the new standards.

In general, and certainly with regard to gateway course redesign, postsecondary faculty want to know what they can expect from graduates prepared under the CCSS or similarly rigorous college- and career-ready high school standards. This interest creates an opportunity for faculty to delve more deeply into the standards. States and institutions should be thoughtful about identifying the right opportunity to introduce faculty to the new standards. In some cases, K–12 (particularly secondary) teachers with expertise in college-ready standards may be natural collaborators; in other cases, faculty may be more receptive to other faculty—possibly from institutions outside their own—or to national experts, like the authors of the standards or other consultants.

6. Plan for the evolution of materials.

The relevance of redesigned gateway courses will grow over time as more students arrive on campuses having increased experience with and mastery of higher K–12 standards. Success, in terms of what faculty see from incoming students, will not appear right away; immediate implementation of gateway course materials that assume student mastery of college-ready standards may not work. It may be more appropriate to create feedback loops for faculty and departments to communicate about how the implementation of new syllabi and resources is going. Institutions can elicit faculty feedback on which lessons and texts generate good discussion and student work versus those that fail to support learning in their courses, as well as how these materials work with different student populations (including those receiving co-requisite remedial support, for example). Consider these tools living and evolving documents as new cohorts of students enter postsecondary classrooms.

III. Actions in States: Tennessee

Building new materials and buy-in: examining the process

For Tennessee, redesigning gateway courses represented an opportunity to build understanding and expertise about, as well as ownership of, the state's college and career readiness standards among key faculty stakeholders. The gateway course redesign effort resulted in a set of common resources for the state's nine public universities and 13 community colleges.



Beginning in spring 2013, Tennessee's Core to College project leader, based at the state's Higher Education Commission, convened teams of three mathematics and three English faculty from different campuses. Over a year, in a series of in-person meetings, these faculty learned about the state's English and mathematics standards from experts at Achieve (a nonprofit that advocates for higher standards and aligned assessments), considered the implications of the instructional shifts reflected by the standards for their gateway courses, and authored sample syllabi and model lessons for two courses common across Tennessee campuses: English 1010 (a composition course) and College Algebra.

After designing the materials, the faculty leads and the Core to College leader embarked on a multilayered engagement process across the state. They sought and received reviews and endorsements of the materials from internal evaluators across 10 different campuses, presented to the Tennessee Council of the Chairs of Mathematics, and coordinated "prepilots" at two major campuses. Faculty leads used feedback from all of these sources to adjust the content of the redesign materials. In spring and early summer 2014, the faculty leads began running professional development sessions on campuses throughout the state, walking their colleagues through these materials and explaining how they might be used in gateway courses affected by other state reforms (such as co-requisite remediation). In fall 2014, participants in the professional development sessions began a full pilot of the course redesign materials.

Seed money and project management from Core to College in Tennessee supported the development of the model syllabi and sample tasks (including stipends and meeting expenses for the faculty teams), as well as the initial professional development. In the long run, the state-level resource hub of [TNCORE.org](https://www.tn.gov/core) will house model syllabi and tasks, and pilot faculty are expected to become advocates for the redesigned gateway courses.

What Tennessee learned: takeaways to date

Using experts (in this case, from Achieve) to deliver faculty workshops on the instructional shifts in the standards and aligned assessments helped the faculty writer teams gain a deeper understanding of what a college-ready student prepared under the new college-ready standards will know and be able to do. This understanding was critical to both faculty buy-in and their ability to redesign curricula. For example, math faculty members were pleasantly surprised by a sample problem from the PARCC assessment that highlighted expectations that college-ready students feel comfortable with messy, real-world data in response to mathematical inquiry.

At the same time, however, Core to College leaders learned to be careful about overemphasizing the influence that the standards themselves should have in college classrooms. Tennessee has been a leading state on K–12 implementation of college-ready standards, so it was easy to lapse into K–12 language and messaging about college readiness. However, facilitators and faculty leads quickly learned to **be thoughtful about communications**, finding that what works for a K–12 audience can rub a postsecondary audience the wrong way. For example, “13th-grade” branding, appealing to K–12 teachers, can offend postsecondary faculty. Similarly, the faculty redesign team behind the English 1010 model syllabus preferred to describe the course design as “aligned to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Framework for the Common Core”—NCTE is an association that includes college faculty—rather than simply “aligned to Tennessee’s college-ready standards.”

Finally, careful as the team has tried to be about communications, the course redesign materials have gotten **bogged down in other tensions around postsecondary reforms**. For example, Tennessee’s Board of Regents (which supervises state universities and community colleges) recently mandated that remediation be delivered in a co-requisite model, to the frustration of some faculty. The faculty rumor mill has, in a few cases, lumped the gateway course syllabi in with these mandated reforms. In this difficult situation, the faculty redesign team members again proved to be critical ambassadors for the project: They explained in peer-to-peer conversations (including those conducted in closed-door, faculty-only meetings) that the redesigned materials are an optional, not required, resource.



Endnotes

1. Tennessee Core to College. (Draft 2014). *Course Profile, Core-Aligned College Algebra*.
2. Complete College America. (Jan. 16, 2014). *22 CCA States and DC Commit to Gateway Course Success*. <http://completecollege.org/22-cca-states-and-dc-commit-to-gateway-course-success/>; White House. (Jan. 16, 2014). *FACT SHEET: The President and First Lady's Call to Action on College Opportunity*. www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/16/fact-sheet-president-and-first-lady-s-call-action-college-opportunity.
3. Complete College America. (April 2012). *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*. www.completecollege.org/docs/CCA-Remediation-final.pdf.
4. *Ibid.*

Resources

Charis McGaugyh, Adrienne van der Valk, Jamila Singleton, Teresa Zalewski and Rachel Farkas. *Bridging the Gap: An Illinois Toolkit for Using the Common Core for Secondary and Postsecondary Alignment*. Educational Policy Improvement Center. 2011. www.iacte.net/files/Attachment%206_IL_Toolkit_v2_FINAL_reduced.pdf.

Laurance J. Warford and Marsha VanNahmen. *Significant Discussions: A Guide for Secondary and Postsecondary Curriculum Alignment*. Phoenix, AZ: League for Innovation in Community College. 2010. http://league.org/league/projects/Significant_Discussions/files/SignificantDiscussions2.pdf.