



Promoting the Transition of High School Students to College

Examining Effective Practices

How can community college practitioners and administrators increase and improve the transition of high school students to college? What issues or obstacles confront this effort? What types of partnerships might strengthen this effort?

These and other questions are investigated in *Effective Practices for Promoting the Transition of High School Students to College (Transition Primer)*, an in-depth examination of high school to college transition that represents the substantial body of literature published on the topic.¹

The following brief offers a high-level summary of the *Transition Primer*—focusing on effective strategies for transition implementation and strategic considerations for colleges interested in starting or expanding student transition programs and practices.

Prepared by a team of researchers, faculty and administrators from the RP Group and the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, *Effective Practices for Promoting the Transition of High School Students to College* was published in early 2009 and funded by the State Chancellor's Office. It is part of the Basic Skills Initiative and is one of a number of documents relating to the "Poppy Copy"—a review of effective practices in developmental education.

What Issues Impact Transition?

As the primary gateway to higher education for a large percentage of the state's population, the California Community College (CCC) system's mission includes providing basic skills instruction—the impetus for open access policies and corresponding endeavors such as the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI). Each year, large numbers of students enroll who are under-prepared to succeed in college-level work. Along with forecasts predicting that the fastest-growing jobs will require a minimum of an associate's degree, and increasing high school dropout and first-year college attrition rates, the result is a vast and complex issue facing the state and its schools. Understanding and improving the high school to college transition function is therefore an increasingly urgent priority for higher education practitioners, administrators, advocates and policymakers alike.

Six Effective Transition Practices

Analysis of 122 published studies and review of 25 programs throughout the nation yielded six effective transition practices. These strategies tend to be programmatic rather than isolated interventions, which makes assessing the impact of individual aspects within each challenging. Research implies that combinations of strategies working together tend to have the greatest impact.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 1: Rigor – While in high school, students take and complete a rigorous curriculum of college-preparatory courses.

FINDINGS: The most important predictor of bachelor’s degree attainment is the academic intensity of a student’s high school curriculum. Additionally, the strongest predictors of college persistence and degree attainment are prior academic achievement and pre-college course selection.

• **Completion of the academic core improves student outcomes.**

Results show that students who complete the college-preparatory core are more likely to avoid dropping out of high school, score higher on the ACT test, enroll in college, be prepared for credit-bearing college courses, avoid remedial courses in college, achieve a first-year college grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher, persist in college and earn a college degree.

• **Specific advanced courses are linked to student success.**

Of particular note is the finding that taking higher level coursework beyond the recommended academic core resulted in higher achievement (as measured by ACT scores) after controlling for prior academic experience, suggesting that all students—not just high achievers—may benefit from taking higher-level coursework.

• **Not all students receive the recommended core.**

Only about half of high school students nationwide take college-preparatory coursework, and of students taking the ACT test nationally slightly more than half reported that they had taken all the courses in the ACT-recommended core curriculum.

The longstanding practice of tracking in high schools (separating students into classes based on perceived ability) is reportedly still prevalent in high schools throughout the nation, despite being associated with racial and ethnic inequities and running counter to the notion of a rigorous curriculum for all students.

• **Libraries have a role to play.**

The literacy gap between high school and college transition has been widely noted, particularly with regards to information literacy (the ability to find, retrieve, analyze and use information). High school library use has been found to be a predictor of college library use, thus reinforcing the importance of literacy programs in secondary schools.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 2: Relevance - High school course content and delivery are made relevant to students’ lives, with clear applications for how high school work is connected to postsecondary education and career opportunities.

FINDINGS:

Studies show that dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement, and a major reason for this is a lack of clear connection between schoolwork and personal goals or real life. Effective high school programs have been described as educational experiences that are student-focused and project-based, which help students connect with the learning process and stay connected over time, and also create opportunities for team-teaching and interdisciplinary coordination.

Contextualized Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a mechanism that has been proposed for addressing the disconnect between academic and applied learning. CTL is typically delivered in linked or clustered courses such as learning communities, or through academic course offerings that teach basic skills using career-related content in connection with an occupational theme.

For more information on CTL, see the *CTL Primer* along with other reports, presentations and resources (www.rpgroup.org/css/CTL.html).

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 3: Alignment - High school exit standards and skills align with college-level entry requirements.

FINDINGS:

Misalignment between high school exit standards and requirements for entry-level success in college is a key issue that impedes student transition and progress. Higher education institutions were not represented when California completed its K-12 academic content standards in 1997. Consequently, high school graduates' knowledge and skills do not always integrate with those needed for success at the postsecondary level. Contributing to this misalignment is the existence of multiple placement instruments and processes, and differences in disciplines emphasized by high school and college faculty.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 4: Realistic expectations - Accurate and timely information is communicated to students and families regarding expected knowledge, performance standards, attitudes and behaviors that students will need in order to be successful in college.

FINDINGS:

Related to the issue of inter-segmental misalignment is an acknowledged gap in the way expectations for college work is communicated to K-12 students and their families. Students transitioning from high school need as much information as possible about the college environment and their role in it. However, research confirms that most high school graduates have many inaccurate perceptions resulting in poorly developed notions of what to expect when they enter college. Correcting common misconceptions is an essential component in preparing students for college enrollment and success.

Working to Improve Alignment

Early Assessment Program (EAP)

Implemented by California State University, in collaboration with the California Department of Education, this program encourages 11th graders to take an augmented California Standards Test (CST), after which students have the opportunity to enroll in enhanced English classes or take additional mathematics in 12th grade to extend their level of college preparation.

California Community College Common Assessment Test

The CCC Chancellor's Office is developing a common placement instrument for application at the system level. Projected goals include: the development of a statewide network for the sharing of assessment data across the colleges; compatibility tables for the limited number of commercially-produced placement instruments most commonly used in community colleges; and increased funding and resources to implement mandatory assessment, particularly for counseling and student services.

- **There is a lack of information about college.**

Various sources of information about college are available to students, but studies find that they are often not utilized. Early access to guidance and information can be critical, since research indicates that most students develop occupational and educational expectations as early as the 9th grade. Research also shows that many adolescents either underestimate or overestimate the amount of education they need to pursue particular careers.

- **Access to advisors in high school is important.**

High school teachers and staff play an important role in providing needed information and promoting college attendance. High school students who are performing at middle and lower academic levels are often passed over by postsecondary outreach efforts.

- **Misunderstandings and misconceptions are common.**

Community college messaging is meant to convey accessibility, but it does not always speak to the need to prepare for coursework, and schools often do not advertise their academic standards and placement procedures.

- **State-level initiatives promote college awareness.**

Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana and North Carolina have initiatives aimed at assessing high school student readiness for college and providing mechanisms to assist students with setting appropriate expectations. At the broader state level, where the possibility for substantial resources and infrastructure exists, impact on transition can be particularly effective and far-reaching.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 5: Support for transitions – Secondary and postsecondary partners develop programs and activities that provide both academic and non-academic support during the transition period.

FINDINGS:

Since the transition from high school to college is recognized as a period of significant change requiring the adjustment of students' cognitive and affective strategies, a variety of programs have been designed to address obstacles and provide support for entry into postsecondary education. These bridging efforts take many forms but are generally theory-based, with components focusing on issues proven or perceived to affect student enrollment, persistence or success in the college environment.

- **Student expectations are an important factor.**

Patterns of students' time allocation established during the first year persist throughout their time in college. Those who enter college with unrealistic expectations are less academically successful than those with lower but more realistic expectations.

- **Student attitudes and social support play a role.**

Student characteristics such as academic self-confidence, academic discipline, communication skills, study skills, commitment to college, emotional control and general determination positively correlate with first-year college GPAs.

- **Elements of transition programs vary.**

While there is substantial variety in the structures and emphases of different programs, most provide some level of comprehensive support, taking into account both the academic and non-academic needs of students.

- **Some transition programs benefit at-risk high school populations.**

Students classified in moderate- to high-risk categories for dropping out of high school who enrolled in transition programs were nearly twice as likely to enroll in a four-year college as non-participants, and 1.5 times more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution.

- **Bridge and First Year Experience (FYE) programs provide support throughout transition.**

Many institutions have launched structures to support students through their first semester or first year of college. FYE programs are often a composite of many efforts—and while common on most college campuses, they also reflect the uniqueness of individual schools.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 6: Articulated pathways - Secondary and postsecondary partners collaborate to provide integrated and articulated programs to facilitate student transitions.

FINDINGS:

Articulated dual enrollment programs allow high school programming to be designed to meet the precise expectations for college readiness, which permits a seamless flow between high school and college coursework in the partnering programs. When fully integrated and carefully articulated, these programs exemplify all of the previously listed effective practices in pathways to early enrollment and accumulation of college credits for high school students.

Student Transition in Action

The Transition Primer looked at how various programs across the nation support transition.

Career Academies are a common approach to contextualizing high school instruction across a variety of courses organized around a specific occupational area.

Programs Reviewed: Career Edge Academy at Kirkwood Community College, Cedar Rapids, IA; West Side Technical Institute at Daley College, Chicago, IL; The California Partnership Academies

Bridge Programs generally include various orientation activities, summer workshops preceding the first fall college term, and then a “first-year experience” program that extends support though the first college year.

Programs Reviewed: The Learning Edge Academy Program (LEAP), University Park, PA; The Kansas University Freshman Summer Institute, Lawrence, KS; Mt. San Antonio College Summer Bridge Program, Walnut, CA; Pasadena City College Math Jam, Pasadena, CA; Cabrillo College Digital Bridge Academy, Aptos, CA

Dual Enrollment Programs offer college courses to high school students that are aligned and ladder with high school curricula and expose students to “the college experience.”

Programs Reviewed: Tech Prep in Texas; Academy of the Canyons at College of the Canyons, Santa Clarita, CA; College Now at Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY; Florida State DE Programs

Other Transition Programs provide services supporting college success through academics and personal achievement for a wide variety of students with various backgrounds.

Programs Reviewed: Upward Bound; Gear-Up; Puente Project; Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID); Project Grad; Compact for Success

These programs are collectively referred to by a variety of terms—dual enrollment (DE), concurrent enrollment or credit-based transition programs—and include efforts such as Tech Prep, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Middle College High Schools (MCHS) and Early College High Schools (ECHS).

Dual enrollment can offer a wider array of courses than would otherwise be available at the high schools, ease the psychological transitions to college by demystifying the experience, and provide needed social support networks, all in low- or no-cost environments that help students avoid expensive false starts upon entry into college.

Implications

The key findings for the six effective practices outlined above generate numerous implications, many of which may be seen as largely within the purview of secondary institutions. However, the importance of early preparation and communication of appropriate expectations for college readiness cannot be overemphasized and must actively involve higher education participants. Actions that community colleges can take include the following:

- Reinforce the value of a rigorous, academically focused curriculum with K-12 partners in local districts.
- Support efforts of K-12 partners to connect academic learning with students' career and life goals.
- Encourage stronger support of community college faculty and staff participation in K-12 district-sponsored college nights in order to improve direct communication with students and parents.
- Create mentoring opportunities that connect community college students, staff or faculty with K-12 students.
- Consider investing community college resources to create permanent, fully functioning high school outreach teams.
- Maintain an informed understanding of the common misconceptions, attitudes and beliefs prevalent among K-12 students and their parents that negatively impact college preparation and enrollment.
- Create partnerships between educators and librarians to determine ways that libraries can be used to facilitate greater development of information literacy in pre-collegiate and college students.
- Clearly document and disseminate the performance standards representing the skills and abilities that students need to succeed in the entry-level course for each discipline at community colleges.
- Explore the extent to which existing California Standard Tests or the Early Assessment Program could be useful in informing placement decisions.
- Ensure that all community college placement instruments used are aligned in content and rigor to course expectations.
- Facilitate an ongoing dialogue between community college, university and high school faculty to explore the specifics of any content or assessment misalignment that exists.

- Administer college placement tests to students in 10th or 11th grade at high school sites.
- Eliminate, at all levels, the long-standing practice of tracking (separating high school students into classes based on perceived ability).
- Develop collaborative summer enrichment/bridge programs focused on direct application of student learning acquired in high school classes.
- Explore the development or expansion of well-constructed, thoroughly integrated dual enrollment programs and make determinations on whether these programs will serve as enrichment for select high achievers or be intentionally designed to serve all students.
- Establish transition programs for specific populations or student needs.
- Develop and embed critical mechanisms for early assessment and intrusive student support services within dual enrollment programs to ensure all students can maintain successful progress in college coursework without endangering the completion of the high school core.
- Consider the first college year as an important extension of the high school transition and assign the institution's best faculty to entry-level courses commonly taken by new students in their first year.

Conclusion

Among the *Transition Primer's* notable findings, the discovery that dual enrollment programs benefit not just high-achieving students but also those thought of as under-achievers, serves as a reminder that common perceptions are not always accurate. Also of interest is the fact that points of connectivity for various students look different—the broad diversity of pathways from high school to college corresponds with the broad diversity of students served by CCCs, and taking each into consideration when addressing transition will yield the most substantive and effective solutions.

Implications generated by these findings are profound in terms of directing reform efforts. In order to make the greatest impact, the preparation of students during the high school years cannot be ignored, and the transition process is clearly a shared responsibility of secondary and postsecondary stakeholders. Higher education practitioners are in a key position to take the lead. The more community colleges that put these practices into action, the greater the change to the state's transition process at large—and, most importantly, to individual students.

Discussion Questions for Community College Practitioners & Administrators

The factors found by the *Transition Primer* to advance student transition can serve as the basis for an institution-wide inventory of related practices for community colleges. This assessment can then spur a cross-functional conversation about how to improve your college's transition culture and student success. The following questions, based on some of the findings outlined in this brief, may help guide dialog about expectations, roles and action.

1. Who is the target audience for a transition program? Is there more than one audience?
2. What curriculum might best lend itself to a transition program?
3. What support infrastructure and systems are necessary to ensure student success for such a program? Do these structures and systems already exist?
4. What partners have been identified for this transition program?
5. How does a discussion about policies, roles and expectations of partners begin?
6. Who is responsible for communication among the partners?
7. How will results for a transition program be measured, evaluated and shared?

For Further Information

To view the full *Transition Primer*, as well as additional resources generated by the Basic Skills Initiative, visit: www.rpgroup.org/projects/high-school-transition.

(Endnote)

- 1 Boroch, D. and Hope, L. (2009). *Effective Practices for Promoting the Transition of High School Students to College*.

The Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) conducts research and evaluation projects by utilizing the skills and unique perspectives of California community college researchers, faculty and administrators. Projects identify educational strategies and exemplary practices that promote the success of students and the effectiveness of institutions within the California community college system.

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