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How States Are Implementing Transition Curricula

Results From a National Scan

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While many states have strengthened their high school graduation requirements over the last decade, too many graduates are still underprepared for college (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016). Reasons for this underpreparedness include, among other factors: (1) a lack of clear information on students' progress toward college and career readiness during the high school years that could allow students to address gaps in knowledge and skills, and (2) a mismatch between what high schools teach and the expectations of colleges and employers (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

In response to this problem, states across the country are administering *early college readiness assessments* that measure 11th grade students' readiness to successfully perform entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary coursework. These early assessments inform students and schools about what additional skills in mathematics, reading, or writing are needed in order to enter college successfully, without need for remediation upon college entry. In addition, some states are combining these assessments with *transition curricula* for students who are not college ready.

Early college readiness assessments and transition curricula have the potential to reshape the high-school-to-college pathway.

Transition curricula consist of a course, a set of modules, online tutorials, or other educational experiences offered no later than 12th grade to students who are at risk of being placed into remedial mathematics, reading, or writing when they enter college (Kannapel, 2012). The availability of transition curricula gives help to students who—instead of figuring out how to improve their college readiness on their own—can enroll in a course or other activity in an attempt to become better prepared and possibly avoid remediation (known also as developmental education) altogether. Taken together, early college readiness assessments and transition curricula have the potential to transform the senior year of high school and reshape the high-school-to-college pathway.

The Reshaping the College Transition project at CCRC has investigated national trends regarding the availability of early college readiness assessments and transition curricula since 2012.[1] Our work has included a previous national scan of these interventions conducted in 2012-13 (Barnett, Fay, Bork, & Weiss, 2013),[2] in-depth mixed methods research on transition course models and related policy in four states (Barnett, Fay, & Pheatt, 2016), and a convening of researchers and practitioners involved in transition

course implementation and evaluation who shared knowledge to improve student outcomes in these courses (Barnett, Fay, Pheatt, & Trimble, 2016).

State Scan

The research we report on here, funded by a grant from ECMC Foundation, seeks to build on our previous work and examine how the transition course landscape may have evolved since our last national scan (Barnett et al., 2013). At that time, little was known about the prevalence of early college readiness assessments or transition courses nationally. Since then, our research and the work of the New America Foundation (2016) and the Education Commission of the States (Zinth & Millar, 2015) have documented the extent to which states and localities offer these interventions. The current research further explores the prevalence of transition curricula and focuses on more detailed information about them, including the most common goals of these curricula, the subjects taught, the actors involved in curricular development, and the types of delivery models used.

During the spring and summer of 2017, we engaged in a three-step data collection process. First, we carried out a search of literature and Internet resources to find any references to transition curricula in each of the 50 states and Washington, DC. Second, we created and administered a brief survey to state agency representatives asking for information on transition curricula. Based on the findings of this online survey, we conducted brief follow-up interviews with officials from selected states to gather more information when necessary.[3]

Findings

As shown in Table 1, we find that transition curricula are offered in 39 states as a part of the secondary school curriculum in either statewide or local initiatives. This is much higher than the 29 states that did so according to the 2012-13 scan (see bottom row of table). Curricula offered at the local level—that is, by individual colleges or school districts—are more common than state-led initiatives. Seventeen states offer transition curricula statewide, and 22 offer them in particular localities. The equivalent figures from the 2012-13 scan are 8 and 21, indicating that the number of statewide initiates has doubled over the past few years while the number of local initiatives has remained flat. While there has been no substantial change in the total number of states with local initiatives, a number of states have changed the scope of their implementation. Several states that had offered transition curricula at the local level in 2012-13 now offer them statewide, while others that were listed as "in progress" in 2012-13 now offer courses locally. Generally, results from the two scans indicate that a strong majority of states offer transition curricula and that the number of states that do so has grown sharply in recent years.

The number of states that offer transition curricula has grown sharply in recent years.

For the current scan, representatives of states with local initiatives were invited to estimate the proportion of high schools offering transition curricula in the state. Among those who estimated this figure, the average response was that 29 percent of high schools in the state offer senior year transition curricula. With regard to the subjects taught, the overwhelming majority of the 39 states that provide transition curricula

offer it in both math (all 39 states) and English (36 states); in addition, three states offer other subjects, including writing, reading, and college orientation courses.

Table 1.

Scan Results: Implementation Scope and Subjects Offered

State	Scope of Implementation				Subjects Offered		
	Statewide[a]	Local[b]	In Progress[c]	None	Math	English	Other
Alabama	X				X	X	
Alaska				X			
Arizona		X				X	
Arkansas	X				X	X	
California		X			X	X	
Colorado		X			X	X	
Connecticut		X			X	X	
Delaware		X			X	X	
Florida		X			X	X	
Georgia	X				X	X	
Hawai'i		X			X	X	
Idaho		X			X	X	
Illinois	X				X	X	
Indiana		X			X	X	
Iowa		X			X	X	X
Kansas	X				X		
Kentucky	X				X	X	X
Louisiana			X		X	X	
Maine				X			
Maryland		X					
Massachusetts		X			X	X	
Michigan				X			
Minnesota			X		X	X	X
Mississippi	X				X	X	
Missouri				X			
Montana	X				X	X	
Nebraska				X			
Nevada		X			X	X	
New Hampshire		X			X		
New Jersey	X				X	X	
New Mexico	X				X	X	
New York		X			X	X	
North Carolina	X				X	X	
North Dakota		X			X	X	
Ohio		X			X	X	
Oklahoma		X			X		
Oregon				X			
Pennsylvania		X			X	X	
Rhode Island		X					
South Carolina	X				X	X	
South Dakota		X			X	X	
Tennessee	X				X		
Texas	X				X	X	
Utah	X				X	X	
Vermont				X			
Virginia	X				X	X	
Washington		X			X	X	
West Virginia	X				X	X	
Wisconsin				X			
Wyoming			X		X	X	
District of Columbia				X			
TOTAL	**17**	**22**	**3**	**9**	**39**	**36**	**3**
Total From the 2012-13 Scan[d]	**8**	**21**	**9**	**13**			

[a] State: Indicates that there is a state initiative to offer this intervention across a state, which includes oversight from a state agency.
[b] Local: Indicates that this intervention is offered in specific schools using locally developed approaches, without oversight by a state agency.
[c] In Progress: Indicates that preparatory activities are underway to implement an intervention.
[d] See Barnett et al. (2013).

Table 2.

Scan Results: Delivery Format, Placement, and Advancement

State	Curricular Delivery Formats				Placement Mechanisms			Automatic Advancement to College-Level Coursework		
	Traditional Course	Computer-Mediated	Modules	Other[a]	Placement Tests	Faculty/Staff Recommendations	Other[b]	Yes	No	Do Not Know
Alabama	X				X			X		
Alaska										
Arizona	X		X		X	X			X	
Arkansas	X				X			X		
California	X				X			X		
Colorado	X					X		X		
Connecticut	X	X			X	X				X
Delaware	X				X	X		X		
Florida	X				X				X	
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
Hawai'i	X				X	X		X		
Idaho	X				X	X			X	
Illinois	X	X				X	X	X		
Indiana	X	X	X		X	X		X		
Iowa	X				X			X		
Kansas								X		
Kentucky	X	X	X		X				X	
Louisiana	X				X		X		X	
Maine										
Maryland										
Massachusetts	X	X	X		X	X	X			
Michigan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Minnesota	X	X		X			X		X	
Mississippi	X				X			X		
Missouri										
Montana	X	X			X	X		X		
Nebraska										
Nevada					X			X		
New Hampshire		X			X			X		
New Jersey	X	X	X		X	X		X		
New Mexico	X				X	X			X	
New York	X				X	X				X
North Carolina		X	X				X	X		
North Dakota		X			X				X	
Ohio	X	X			X	X				X
Oklahoma	X				X				X	
Oregon										
Pennsylvania										
Rhode Island										
South Carolina	X			X			X			X
South Dakota	X	X			X	X			X	
Tennessee	X	X			X			X		
Texas	X	X			X	X		X		
Utah	X	X	X		X	X		X		
Vermont										
Virginia	X					X			X	
Washington	X				X			X		
West Virginia	X		X		X				X	
Wisconsin										
Wyoming										
District of Columbia										
TOTAL	**34**	**18**	**10**	**4**	**32**	**20**	**7**	**22**	**12**	**4**

[a] The "other" curricular delivery category includes courses offered fully online and those offered to high school students on college campuses.

[b] The "other" placement mechanism category includes a multiple measures approach and, most commonly reported, the use of a range of indicators determined by local agencies.

As shown in Table 2, the most common delivery format for transition curricula is traditional, lecture-based classroom course instruction, with 34 states utilizing this format. Eighteen states offer transition curricula via computer-mediated formats, while another 10 offer the curricula via supplemental modules that students complete outside of class time. Four states use "other" formats. Seventeen states use more than one type of delivery format.

State representatives reported that the most common mechanism for student placement into transition curricula is placement testing, including ACT, SAT, ACCUPLACER, and state accountability tests (32 states). However, it is also common for states to use a combination of test scores and faculty/staff recommendations to place students (20 states).

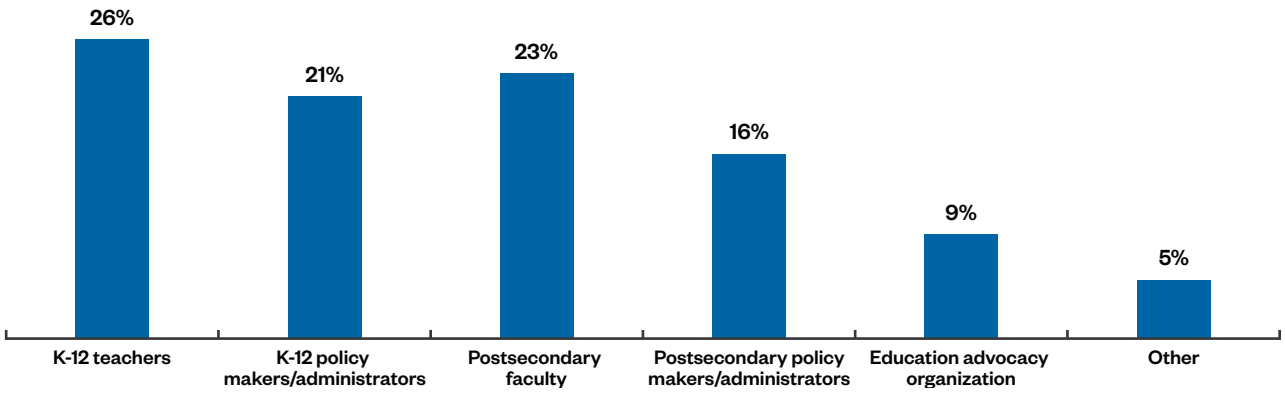
Successful completion of transition curricula result in different college placement procedures. Twenty-two states (or 58 percent of states that offer transition curricula) reported that students who complete these transition curricula automatically matriculate into college-level courses, while 12 states (32 percent) do not consider completion of transition curricula to be sufficient evidence of college readiness. In these states, students must take additional steps to demonstrate college readiness.

In 22 of the 39 states that offer transition curricula, students who complete the curricula automatically matriculate into college-level courses.

Survey results from the 39 states offering transition curricula provide insights about six types of stakeholders who may have played a role in developing the curricula and on the most common goals associated with them. As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent participants in curriculum development were K-12 teachers, followed by postsecondary faculty, K-12 administrators and policymakers, postsecondary administrators and policymakers, and education advocacy organizations such as Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). Survey respondents could select more than one type of stakeholder; many indicated that numerous stakeholders played a role in curriculum development.

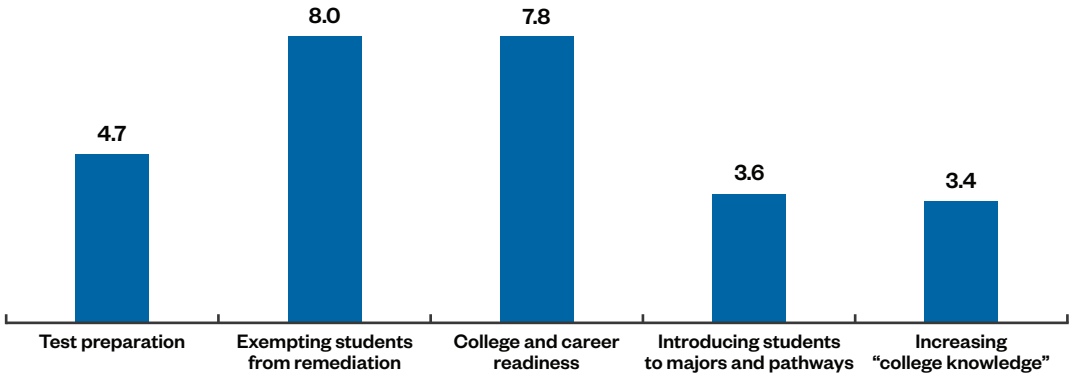
Figure 1.

Proportion of States With Each Type of Curriculum Development Participant



The survey presented respondents with five kinds of course goals. They were asked to rate each one in terms of its importance on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). Goals included (1) test preparation for ACT, SAT, COMPASS, or state accountability exams; (2) exemption from remedial coursework in college; (3) development of college- and/or career-ready skills; (4) introduction of academic majors and/or career paths; (5) supporting students' "college knowledge," such as providing guidance about FAFSA completion. The survey also offered an "other" goal category that respondents could define. Figure 2 shows the average rating of each goal by those who responded in each category— goals (2) and (3) are found to be much more important than the others.

Figure 2.
Average Rating of Goals (1–10 Scale)



Conclusion

This brief provides a high-level perspective on the availability of transition curricula across the United States over time. It also offers insights into the amount of variation that is found in terms of curricular design and goals, subject-area focus, how students are selected to participate, and whether completion of transition curricula guarantees placement into college-level courses. Yet there is still much to learn. Existing evidence does not tell us what proportion of students have access to transition curricula. Further, we still know very little about which curricular designs are effective in improving student outcomes and thus worthy of scaling up. It is clear that the central argument underlying this approach—that students should graduate high school ready for college-level work in math and English—is compelling enough that the approach continues to attract interest and to grow.

Endnotes

1. Most of the earlier work was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
2. Much of the introductory text in the current paper is adapted from Barnett et al. (2013).
3. For example, we used the follow-up interviews to resolve any discrepancies we found between information obtained from the online search and the survey.

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