

Early Assessments and Transition Curricula: What States Can Do

When states roll out the Common Core assessments—or other “college- and career-ready” assessments—a large number of 11th grade students will find out that they are not considered college ready. How can high schools make the best use of 12th grade to help these students get ready for college-level work?

Some states, districts, and schools have already taken steps to address this question by creating 12th grade transition courses, designed to bolster the skills of students who have been deemed “not college ready” on 11th grade assessments. These courses vary in subject matter and format, but all are designed to reduce the likelihood that participating students will be placed in remedial courses when they enroll in college.

Policymakers may be interested in scaling up early assessment and transition programs, but before doing so, they should understand what we do and do not know about these programs and be aware of broader state policy considerations that may help or hinder their implementation and success.

What We Know About Early Assessments

- **Some form of early college readiness assessment is offered in 38 states;** 25 of these are statewide initiatives.¹ An intervention is not always provided to students whose scores on the assessments indicate they are not college ready. Instead, it is assumed that the information the assessments provide will help students to take appropriate action to prepare for college.

- **Among states that administer early assessments, some use existing state accountability tests,** while others use the SAT, ACT, or college placement tests such as COMPASS. Many states that do not currently assess the college readiness of high school students expect to do so once assessments aligned to the Common Core become available from the PARCC² and Smarter Balanced assessment consortia.
- **Very little research has examined the impacts of early college readiness assessments.** However, one study found that students who took an early assessment test without further linked intervention were 6 and 4 percentage points less likely to need remediation in English and math, respectively.³

What We Know About Transition Curricula

Many high school and college leaders think that early assessment should be followed by an intervention, which is why some states and districts have designed transition curricula.

- **Transition curricula are offered in 29 states.** Of these, eight are statewide initiatives; the rest were developed by individual high schools or districts, sometimes in partnership with colleges.⁴
- **Transition courses most frequently focus on math;** the rest typically cover college-level reading and writing.
- **No rigorous studies have yet examined outcomes** for participating students. CCRC is studying student outcomes for transition curricula in two states.⁵ Findings are expected to be released in 2015.

State Policy Considerations

- **Strong collaboration between the K-12 and higher education sectors** is vital to the design process for transition courses. Both sectors must agree on a definition of college readiness and work to ensure that the skills and knowledge assessed and taught are well aligned with those needed for college success. In some states, legislation requires that both sectors be involved in developing the course.
- **State-level K-12 and postsecondary accountability systems** can encourage collaboration across sectors by holding high schools accountable for preparing students to meet colleges' definition of readiness, and by holding colleges accountable for students' progression through developmental education and college programs.
- **State-level mandates for increased college-preparatory course requirements**—for instance, requiring all high school students to complete four years of math—can reduce the need for remediation upon college entry and broaden enrollment in transition courses.

Questions to Address When Designing Transition Curricula

- **How should college readiness be defined?** Community colleges may have different readiness standards than state universities, and both of these may be different from the Common Core standards. Even within colleges, standards may vary across programs of study. K-12 and postsecondary stakeholders must determine together what standards they will use to define college readiness when designing a curriculum.
- **What should be the goal of transition courses?** Should they focus on helping students place out of developmental education (for example, by helping students pass college placement tests), or should they focus on increasing students' readiness for college-level work? These goals should be aligned but often are not, underscoring the need to better align college placement criteria with college-level course expectations.

- **Which students should transition courses target?** Students who barely miss college readiness cut scores may need a different intervention than students with much lower test scores. In states that have implemented transition curricula, there has been concern that a one-size-fits-all approach could turn a course into a “dumping ground” or just another low-level offering.

1. Barnett, E. A., Fay, M. P., Bork, R. H., & Trimble, M. J. (2013). *Reshaping the college transition: States that offer early college readiness assessments and transition curricula*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
2. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers .
3. Howell, J. S., Kurlaender, M., & Grodsky, E. (2010). *Postsecondary preparation and remediation: Examining the effect of the early assessment program at California State University*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(4), 726–748.
4. Barnett et al. (2013). *Reshaping the college transition: States that offer early college readiness assessments and transition curricula*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
5. Visit CCRC's project page [Reshaping the College Transition](#) for more information and for publication updates.

This brief is based on a longer Community College Research Center (CCRC) report titled [Reshaping the College Transition: Early College Readiness Assessments and Transition Curricula in Four States](#) and is connected with a three-year study of early college readiness assessment and transition curricula. Funding was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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