

## English Transition Courses in Context Preparing Students for College Success

By Sarah Griffin

Nationwide there is widespread agreement that many high school graduates are underprepared for success in college. Underlying this consensus are statistics indicating that approximately two thirds of students entering community college are placed into developmental coursework (also known as remedial coursework), and that such students are less likely to complete college compared with students who are not placed into developmental education (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Research also indicates that it is important to prepare students for college before they graduate from high school (Conley, 2007; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2013; Southern Regional Educational Board, 2013).

Many states are implementing *early college readiness assessments*, which measure 11th grade students' readiness for successful completion of entry-level, credit-bearing college courses. The results of these assessments can be used to identify (1) whether students are on track to avoid placement into developmental coursework and (2) which students may benefit from taking a "transition course" during their senior year in high school.

In 2017, CCRC conducted a national scan of available information on transition curricula. CCRC researchers undertook a review of the literature and of Internet resources, and conducted an online survey of state representatives in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the scan was to learn about the availability and types of transition curricula nationwide. Results show that transition curricula are provided to high school students in a majority of states (39). A greater proportion of these 39 states offer curricula at the local level (22 states) rather than statewide (17 states).<sup>2</sup> All provide curricula in mathematics (39 states) and/or English (36 states). A strong majority of states (34 of 39) use a traditional, lecture-based approach in teaching these classes, while 18 states use a computer-mediated format; in 10 states curricula are provided through supplemental modules that students complete outside of class time. Four states have implemented "other" course formats. Seventeen states use a combination of instruction types (Fay, Barnett, & Chavarín, 2017).

This study reported on here extends our understanding of the transition curricula landscape by focusing on English transition curricula and how they are implemented.<sup>3</sup> It describes features of English transition programs in seven states, summarizes findings on the effectiveness of particular programs, and discusses six major trends that affect the design of the curricula.



### TRANSITION CURRICULA:

**Courses, learning modules, or online tutorials typically developed jointly by secondary and postsecondary faculty and offered no later than 12th grade to students at risk of being placed into remedial math or English programs in college. This brief mainly discusses transition courses of a semester to a year in length.**

## Methods

This study draws on data from four sources—in-depth interviews, research literature, online resources, and information collected from CCRC’s 2017 national scan of transition curricula—to describe the design, implementation, and effectiveness of English transition curricula. With respect to the interviews, CCRC researchers had telephone interviews with nine individuals (identified from the 2017 scan) from seven states (AL, CA, FL, KY, MA, NC, TN) who were involved in the oversight, development, or implementation of English transition curricula in their state.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were asked to describe the impetus for the development of English transition curricula in their state, the goals of the curricula, how and by whom the courses were designed, the content area and instructional style of the courses, how and with what support high schools implemented the courses, evidence of effectiveness, and overall perceptions of the transition curricula in their state.<sup>5</sup> The telephone interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic coding analysis using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software.

## English Transition Curricula in Seven States

Table 1 provides an overview of English transition curricula in the seven states. It indicates the scope of implementation and the instructional approach for each program as described by the interviewees from the states. According to interviewees, English transition curricula are typically developed by collaborating K-12 teachers and postsecondary stakeholders (only one interviewee indicated limited involvement by higher education personnel in the development of the English transition curricula in that state). Interviewees from all states agreed that English transition courses are most concerned with preparing students to be successful in college-level courses. In addition to this goal, all interviewees indicated that the transition courses are also explicitly designed so that students may avoid placement into developmental English courses when they enter college.<sup>6</sup> For California’s Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) and Tennessee’s Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS) English module—a third goal of the curricula is to provide an opportunity to increase students’ learning of high school English content.

Table 1 also indicates content areas addressed by the curricula as well as content areas that are particularly emphasized (in those cases in which we learned that there are emphasized areas). English transition curricula in all seven states include reading and writing as content areas. All but one program includes literature as a content area, yet the SAILS English module is the only program that emphasizes literature (specifically British literature). Other content areas that are addressed include grammar, test preparation for college entrance or placement tests (e.g., the SAT or ACCUPLACER), and speaking and listening skills.

**Table 1.**  
Information About English Transition Curricula in Seven States

State	Program/ Course Title	Scope of Implementation <sup>a</sup>	Instructional Approach	Content Areas					
				Literature	Reading	Writing	Grammar	College Test Preparation	Speaking and Listening
AL	Literacy Ready	Statewide	Uses discipline-specific units in history, English, and science to teach reading and writing skills.	X	X	X	X		X
CA	Expository Reading and Writing Course <sup>b</sup>	Local	Uses mainly informational texts to teach students reading and writing skills in a module-based format.	X	X	X	X		X
FL	English IV: College Prep Writing for College Success Reading for College Success	Local	Are similar to Florida's non-transition English courses but also include test preparation and study skills for college placement tests.	X	X	X	X	X	X
KY <sup>c</sup>	English Transition Course	Statewide	Use discipline-specific units based on the ACT test to teach reading and writing skills and literature; encourage teachers to use the most suitable instructional approach for their students.	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Reading Transitional Course			X	X	X		X	X
MA	JFYNetWorks College and Career Readiness Program	Local	Provides an online English curriculum aligned to the reading comprehension and sentence skills standards of the ACCUPLACER test; curriculum is integrated on a weekly basis into students' regular English course to create a blended learning experience.		X	X		X	
NC	College and Career Ready Graduate Course (CCRG) English	Statewide	Uses a customized, online curriculum to build students' reading, writing, and grammar skills.	X	X	X	X		
TN	Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS) English module <sup>d</sup>	Statewide	Uses a blended learning format to teach British literature along with reading and writing skills.	X	X	X	X		X

Note. Shaded boxes indicate, when evident, the main curricular focus of the course.

The content areas indicated were in some cases described by the interviewees but also confirmed through other sources, including these: Southern Regional Education Board (2014) (Alabama), California State University (2016) (California), Mokher et al. (2017) (Florida), Kentucky Department of Education website (Kentucky), The Boston Foundation (2018) (Massachusetts), NROC Project (n.d.).

<sup>a</sup> Fay, Barnett, & Chavarín (2017).

<sup>b</sup> The ERWC also includes habit-of-mind activities, discussed in the Trends section on nonacademic skills, p. 6.

<sup>c</sup> Kentucky schools use various names for their transition courses as there is no state requirement to use uniform course titles (Flory & Cramer, 2017). Additionally, high schools in Kentucky can use courses developed by the state or other providers. The description here refers to the state courses.

<sup>d</sup> In summer 2018, an interviewee from Tennessee confirmed that the SAILS English module will no longer be offered beginning in the 2018-2019 school year. Discussion of the SAILS English module in this brief refers its prior implementation.

## Effectiveness of English Transition Curricula

At the time of the interviews, just one interviewee had evidence available on the extent to which the state's transition program was meeting its goals. Mokher, Leeds, and Harris's (2017) study examined the effects of the Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI), the state's policy requiring college readiness testing and participation in college readiness courses in 12th grade for targeted students. The authors found, using a regression discontinuity design, a higher likelihood of enrolling in non-developmental courses for some targeted students upon entry into college, yet no evidence that the policy changed targeted students' pass rates in these courses.

Other research also indicates mixed impacts of English transition courses for participating students. In a study published by WestEd, for example, researchers used a matched analysis to evaluate California's ERWC on students' English Placement Test (EPT) scores, a standardized test given to students entering the California State University (CSU) system, during the 2013–14 academic year. The study found a positive impact, with an estimated effect size of 0.13 standard deviations (Fong, Finkelstein, Jaeger, Diaz, & Broek, 2015).

Research on New York City's Lessons in Navigating College Transition (LINCT) English Language Arts course<sup>7</sup> found that for the fall 2014 semester, a greater percentage of the course's most recent high school graduate cohort enrolled in City University of New York (CUNY) degree programs, compared with the study's comparison group (42 vs. 37 percent). By the end of 12th grade, students who had taken the course achieved proficiency in reading and writing at a rate more than 20 percentage points higher than the comparison group (Barnett, Fay, Pheatt, & Trimble, 2016).

Finally, recent research shows that students' ACT scores improved after completing Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB)<sup>8</sup> English transition course, Literacy Ready. Over half of students (106 students total) who completed Literacy Ready improved their ACT scores in English (by 3 or more points) and science (by 2 or more points), as well as their overall ACT score (by 2 or more points), from 2015 to 2016 (Southern Regional Education Board, 2017).

## Trends in the Development of English Transition Curricula

There are several major trends in the design and implementation of English transition curricula that we learned about primarily (but not exclusively) through our interviews.

### Common Core and statewide K-12 academic content standards inform the design of English transition curricula.

In an effort to align skills expectations among high schools, colleges, and entry-level workforce opportunities nationwide, in 2010, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers launched a broad reform effort known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative. These standards delineate a set of goals and expectations in English language arts and mathematics designed to align with college readiness by the end of 12th grade.

To date, 41 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the CCSS<sup>9</sup> to help prepare students for the expectations of college and careers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018b). The CCSS are based on rigorous content expectations and emphasize the development of students' higher order thinking skills essential for higher education and beyond. Our interviewees indicated that state K-12 academic standards informed the development of English transition curricula in six states. Changes to the Tennessee SAILS program, for example, were driven in part by Tennessee's adoption of statewide standards.

## **Transition curricula strive for alignment with college writing expectations.**

While reading comprehension is certainly essential to students' long-term academic success, it is widely agreed that strong writing skills are central to the demands of postsecondary education and an increasingly educated workforce (College Entrance Examination Board, 2003). Academic assessment data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other sources consistently demonstrate, however, that high school students' writing skills are insufficient to succeed in college-level coursework (Addison & McGee, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007).

Although some studies have found that high school writing instructors and college writing instructors generally agree on important aspects of writing instruction (Addison & McGee, 2010; Patterson & Duer, 2006), writing instruction in high school tends to be more formulaic than in college (Fanetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese, 2010). In high school there is limited attention to writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, & Crawford, 2011), and extended writing assignments are not common (Applebee & Langer, 2011). College-level English courses—in contrast—typically require more writing, including more extended writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Brockman et al., 2011), as well as greater complexity of thought and use of ideas (Brockman et al., 2011; Fanetti et al., 2010).

Initiatives such as the CCSS English language arts standards, and more recently, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing—developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project—represent efforts to create high expectations for students' writing competencies (O'Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, & Hall, 2012). The Framework, for example, focuses on students' development of eight habits of mind—(1) curiosity, (2) openness, (3) engagement, (4) creativity, (5) persistence, (6) responsibility, (7) flexibility, and (8) metacognition—that are fundamental to success in college writing, and on the types of writing, reading, and analytic skills students need to foster these habits (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project, 2011).

Writing is a highly important content area within English transition curricula. The ERWC and Literacy Ready, for which the most documentation was available in our review, embed writing activities that are aligned to the CCSS and that include elements of the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. Each module of the ERWC includes a variety of writing activities, including a summative writing assignment, where students are graded on their rhetorical effectiveness and on their demonstrated consideration of audience and purpose (California State University, n.d.). The interviewee from California explained that teacher professional development for the course has been updated to include a more explicit focus on writing instruction, including the expectation that students revise their writing.

## **Some English transition courses integrate content from other disciplines to teach reading and writing in a contextualized way.**

Traditionally, reading and writing skills are taught independently from the disciplinary areas or other contexts in which they are applied. Research has shown that this approach can be problematic, as students may struggle to apply these skills within the various subjects within their college-level courses. To address this problem, a growing body of research supports instructional strategies that integrate basic skills and subject-area instruction. One such strategy—contextualization—is “the teaching of basic skills in the context of disciplinary topic areas” (Perin, 2011, p. 1). The main purpose of contextualized learning is to teach basic academic skills along with discipline-specific content.<sup>10</sup>

Some English transition curricula offer contextualized learning to students.<sup>11</sup> A prominent example is the SREB Literacy Ready course. Currently used by more than 10 states as part of their college readiness initiatives (Southern Regional Education Board, 2017), Literacy Ready provides opportunities for students to understand and respond in writing to texts in English, social science, and science—three core subject areas that students will encounter in college. For example, in the history unit on U.S. foreign affairs in Literacy Ready, students read various texts and practice writing historical arguments related to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War (Southern Regional Education Board, 2014). Similarly, the transition courses available through the Kentucky Department of Education include units in history, humanities, and science (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.a; Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.b).

New York City’s LINCT English Language Arts course, designed by CUNY, is another example of an English transition course that incorporates disciplinary content to prepare students for the rigor and subject matter of college courses. Psychology and sociology are used in this two-semester course because students frequently enroll in college courses in these disciplines but do not pass them (CUNY, 2018). In the first semester of this course, called “Why People Do What They Do,” students learn about human thought and behavior through psychological theories of needs and through concepts such as motivation, willpower, grit, and mindset. In the second semester, called “The Sociological Imagination,” students explore the relationship between what C. Wright Mills termed “personal troubles” and “public issues” and the implications of these relationships for persons’ sense of membership in society (CUNY, 2018).

## **In addition to academic skill development, some English transition courses also focus on nonacademic skills that affect college readiness.**

Research suggests that preparation for college is driven in part by nonacademic circumstances, including each student’s social environment, noncognitive skills, peer influences, and parental education and expectations (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Through our review of online resources, we learned that some English transition curricula focus on nonacademic skills and circumstances. The ERWC, for example, includes activities designed to foster positive habits of mind such as persistence, reflection, and open-mindedness. The ERWC’s module, “What’s Next? Thinking About Life After High School,” is one clear example of how the course addresses students’ nonacademic skills, in particular goal setting, as well as important knowledge about how college works. Students consider the pros and cons of going to college versus entering the workforce after high school and learn about the college application process and financial aid. At the conclusion of

the module, students are required to write either a personal statement for college admission or a statement of purpose for a job application (Barnett et al., 2016).

Kentucky's English and reading transition courses, like the ERWC, also make an explicit connection between students' learning attitudes and college readiness. As the program documentation for the English transition course states, "Any course designed to move students forward in terms of preparing them for college and career readiness would also require the teacher to consider aspects of student motivation, attitude, and goal setting" (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.a, p. 10). To this end, the course recommends several books and online resources to encourage teachers to create a classroom environment that fosters a positive attitude toward learning, helps students apply prior knowledge to academic content, and encourages students to create personal goals for themselves (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.a).

### **Some English transition courses are intentionally designed to be more engaging than standard high school English courses.**

The developers of some English transition curricula explicitly design the courses to be more engaging than regular English courses, with the intention of improving students' interest and performance in the intervention (Barnett et al., 2016). One strategy is to make use of topics that appeal to students' interests. In California, the ERWC specifically includes course materials and themes that address current social issues, such as racial profiling, the value of life, good food versus bad food, juvenile justice, and bullying (California State University, 2016). The interviewee who discussed the ERWC explained that the course's focus on stimulating course materials will continue, and that the course's texts are being updated to reflect a wider breadth of genres and authors.

Other English transition curricula that emphasize topics that are engaging and relevant to students' lives include the state of Washington's Bridge to College English Language Arts course and Virginia's English Capstone Course.<sup>12</sup> The Bridge to College English Language Arts course, in fact, adopts several topics from the ERWC (such as racial profiling and juvenile justice) and has developed its own relevant topics, including space travel and colonization and "the power of service" (in which students identify a need within their community). Teachers of this transition course may also implement a culminating writing project (called "Brace for Impact!") in which students are expected to develop recommendations for addressing pressing climate issues (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, College Spark Washington, n.d.). Similarly, the English Capstone Course in Virginia is based on high interest topics, such as current events, entertainment, health, and sports (Virginia Department of Education, 2011).

Another strategy for increasing students' engagement is the use of innovative instructional approaches (Barnett et al., 2016). One strategy is blended learning, which maintains that individuals learn in different and usually multiple ways. A blended learning approach incorporates a combination of teacher-led instruction, self-paced learning, and instruction using the Internet or other technologies. The goal of a course that uses blended learning is "to choose a mixture that will highly motivate the students, and assist them in successfully mastering the course" (Hoic-Bozic, Mornar, & Boticki, 2009, p. 20). The SAILS English module, for example, implements a blended learning approach, whereby students begin the course using online resources and then gradually shift to teacher-led instruction for the remainder of the course.

The JFYNetWorks College and Career Readiness Program also uses a blended learning approach by providing schools an online curriculum and an assigned blended learning specialist. The specialist helps teachers implement the weekly online curriculum and provides ongoing support and professional development in the area of blended learning (The Boston Foundation, 2018).

### **In some cases, students are encouraged to enroll in transition curricula as a prerequisite to dual enrollment opportunities.**

Increasingly, states are requiring educational institutions to promote other postsecondary readiness offerings such as dual enrollment programming (Glancy et al., 2014). From the interviews, we learned of two instances where dual enrollment opportunities—along with transition curricula—are being incorporated into states’ college readiness initiatives. Tennessee high schools, one interviewee explained, are encouraging students to complete SAILS English in the first semester of their senior year so they can complete a dual enrollment course in the second semester. In Kentucky, another interviewee explained, some school districts have policies whereby students, after taking an early college readiness assessment, are placed into either a transition course or a dual enrollment course in partnership with a local community college.

## **Conclusion**

Each year, many recent high school graduates begin college without the knowledge and skills that are needed to excel in college-level courses. Poor alignment between high school and college-level coursework underlies much of this problem. Additionally, college readiness studies indicate that multiple factors—both academic and nonacademic—contribute to students’ lack of adequate preparation for postsecondary education. Transition curricula focused on English, offered in the senior year of high school, represent an important and increasingly popular intervention that aims to help students “catch up” so that they are ready for college by the time they graduate from high school.

Based on interviews and other data, this brief describes key elements of transition curricula in seven states and shows that available evidence on the impact of English transition courses is mixed. By describing six trends that are salient in the development and implementation of transition curricula, the brief also highlights the different ways that this intervention may serve to help prepare students for college. English transition curricula are usually aligned to rigorous K-12 content standards and tend to emphasize college-level writing skills more than other content areas. Some transition curricula also incorporate contextualized learning, teach nonacademic skills that are valuable for the college setting, and use instructional approaches that are designed to engage students deeply in course material that is relevant to their lives. In some cases, transition curricula may also be used along with other college readiness interventions, such as dual enrollment programs. The research reported here illustrates that educators from the K-12 and higher education sectors are optimistic about transition curricula and continue to think in innovative ways about this relatively recent intervention.



## Endnotes

1. Brief follow-up interviews were conducted with survey participants when more information was needed.
2. Eight states and the District of Columbia do not offer transition curricula at the state or local level, and three states are preparing to implement such curricula.
3. This includes reading and writing courses as well as those that combine reading and writing.
4. CCRC researchers also conducted interviews with individuals knowledgeable about math transition curricula in their respective states; see Chavarrín, Barnett, & Griffin (forthcoming).
5. Additionally, during summer 2018, CCRC researchers contacted several interviewees to verify specific information about transition courses offered in their state.
6. These first two goals speak to two slightly different conceptions of college readiness: (1) having the knowledge and skills necessary to do well in college-level assignments and (2) having the ability to place out of developmental education courses and instead enter directly into college-level courses.
7. This course is part of the City University of New York's Lessons in Navigating College Transition, formerly known as the At Home in College program.
8. As discussed by Barnett, Fay, Trimble, and Pheatt (2013), Southern Regional Educational Board was a leader in the early development of transition curricula.
9. To learn more about the adoption of the CCSS, see <http://www.corestandards.org/standards-in-your-state/>. Also, according to Glancy et al. (2014), some states have adopted their own college and career readiness standards.
10. To learn more about contextualization and examples of how it is implemented in instructional settings, see Perin's (2011) literature review on the topic.
11. The JFYNetworks College and Career Readiness Program in Massachusetts intends to offer contextualized programs in the areas of health careers, computer science, and information systems.
12. The English Capstone course is a transitional capstone course, which focuses on college preparation in a single content area. The transitional capstone course should not be confused with a culminating experience capstone course, which Kannapel (2012) describes as a course taken by high school seniors that requires them to combine accumulated high school knowledge to solve a specific problem or complete a research project.

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