

Improving College Readiness in the Age of the Common Core

MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.

Bottom Line: Over the next ten years, more than half of all jobs will require some education beyond high school. The majority of students entering college do not earn a college credential that would give them better access to these jobs. While the Common Core State Standards should lead to more college-ready students over time, students will still need programmatic supports from secondary and postsecondary educational institutions to better prepare them for a successful postsecondary educational career. Some promising program models exist. However, they should be refined based on more formative research, and then expanded to scale and rigorously evaluated.

What Do We Know?

Many low-income high school graduates are not adequately prepared for the transition to college. Many incoming community college students grapple with the “readiness gap,” the difference between students’ academic skills upon enrolling in college and the skills they need for college-level studies. Nearly 60 percent enroll in at least one developmental reading, writing, or math course; often these students fail to progress towards a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year school.

Short and intensive developmental summer “bridge” programs have positive short-term effects, which eventually fade. A recent study conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Research and MDRC of eight college readiness programs in Texas suggests that four- to five-week intensive programs offered during the summer before college designed to reduce students’ need for development coursework can lead to higher rates of passing college-level math and writing courses in the first semester. But there are no effects on cumulative academic progress after two years and no impact on students’ rates of college enrollment or persistence. While developmental summer bridge programs are a popular strategy aimed at improving college readiness, intensive, short-term programs are likely not enough to fully prepare students for college success.

For students who get their GED instead of a high school diploma, few obtain any postsecondary credential. Labor market outcomes for GED holders are much worse than for high school graduates, in part because few of those who pass the GED obtain even one year of postsecondary education or training. GED programs are typically operated in schools, community-based organizations, or community colleges, but few are linked well to postsecondary programs — even those that operate on community college campuses — so the GED often becomes a “terminal degree,” with recipients facing long odds of success in a labor market that offers few opportunities to people with no postsecondary education.

What’s Next?

College readiness bridge programs should start earlier and last longer. Interventions that begin the summer after a student graduates from high school are often too late. The potential impact of college readiness “bridge” programs could be greater if they started during — not after — high school and adopted a long-term approach.

In a project that complements and extends the Texas study, MDRC is working with the College Success Foundation and high schools and colleges in Tacoma, Washington, on a pilot of the “Getting Ready for Success” program, which focuses on more than just a summer “bridge” between high school and college. The

program offers academic and college advising and mentoring to low-income students starting in the summer after their junior year of high school and continuing through their first year of college. During the summer after junior year, students attend an academic program hosted by local postsecondary institutions and students attend another summer program after they graduate for additional catch-up before the start of college. Students also have opportunities to earn monetary and scholarship incentives for completing program activities and academic and college application goals.

A bridge program that connects GED students to postsecondary education looks promising. MDRC is working with the City University of New York (CUNY) LaGuardia Community College on a small-scale, random assignment evaluation of its GED Bridge to Business and Health Careers Program. This program connects GED students to postsecondary education and careers through enhancements to the traditional GED curriculum. But instead of “teaching to the test” like most GED programs, this one includes a specially designed curriculum that integrates material from the fields of health care and business and offers transitional support to help students identify the career or course of study that is right for them. Soon-to-be released early results suggest that the bridge program has a substantial impact on students’ passing the GED and enrolling in college in comparison to students enrolled in the traditional GED preparation program.

Tighter partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions at the local level would complement the goals of the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards, the adoption of standardized college and career-ready curricula in schools across the nation, should help address the misalignment of knowledge and skills between high school and college. But its implementation will not immediately result in better-prepared students. Students are going to need additional support to meet and exceed those standards, as well as guidance about financial aid, college norms, and differences in degree programs.

Strong secondary-postsecondary cooperation at the local level focused on supporting students’ college preparedness will be necessary. Often high schools and colleges pursue multiple strategies that are not explicitly linked to each other — a college-sponsored summer program for high school students is often not aligned with high school activities planned for the students the following year. One of the best approaches is when school districts and postsecondary institutions collaborate. For instance, a successful partnership in Texas had both the local university and school district contribute resources to the program and share the planning. The university, which hosted the program, provided program funds and the district offered student transportation, and each summer at least one program faculty member was also a staff member of the school district. Opportunities for closer collaboration and coordination in these types of approaches could create efficiencies at both educational tiers through shared resourcing and also create a more coherent trajectory of aligned supports for students as they prepare for the transition to college.

The evidence on the effectiveness of college readiness programs needs to be strengthened. A handful of studies provide some insight into how college readiness programs can affect students’ successful matriculation, early persistence in college, and eventual degree completion. However, the majority of existing research has mostly documented the implementation of strategies and in some cases provided non-experimental evidence of their promise to positively impact students. The next step for such initiatives is to test the feasibility of implementing them at larger scale and to evaluate their impacts on the postsecondary educational outcomes of students — for example, expand a program developed by a local district and college to other district/college partners in the state, and combine the expansion with experimental evaluation. We also need to assess the gaps in the current array of college readiness services, identify approaches that can improve their alignment and interaction with each other, and ensure that they complement the new Common Core Standards.