

**Getting Ready for Success:
Bridging the Gap between High School and College in
Tacoma, Washington**

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The Problem

It is now widely recognized that more young Americans than ever before will need postsecondary credentials in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency, which, in turn, is needed to maintain and strengthen our collective prosperity. Unfortunately, only 58 percent of students enrolled at four-year institutions graduate within six years,¹ and only half of those who enroll in a community college hoping to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year college achieve their goal within six years.² One issue is that many students enter college lacking the academic skills needed to succeed there — which forces them to take developmental (or remedial) education courses before they can enroll in college-level, credit-bearing courses. Across the nation, roughly 40 percent of undergraduates enroll in at least one developmental education course. That number is far greater for students in community college, where almost 60 percent of students enroll in at least one developmental course.³ Beyond these academic barriers, many students also face social barriers to successful completion of postsecondary degrees. Many low-income and minority students are the first generation in their families to attempt to attend college, and they often struggle to navigate the postsecondary entry process and college expectations once there.

The Approach

There has been growing interest in programs that focus on college readiness and strengthening the rates of college matriculation and persistence (that is, remaining in school from semester to semester) for low-income students. Although not yet widely offered, a number of local college-readiness programs have been forming to explicitly support students through their transition between high school and college.⁴ The Getting Ready for Success (GRS) Pilot Program, designed by the College Success Foundation (CSF) with support from MDRC — a nonprofit social and education policy research organization — includes a variety of program components for low-income students in two high schools in Tacoma, Washington. The program works to strengthen students' college readiness through both academic and social supports, and it provides monetary incentives during the late high school and early college years to increase students' motivation to succeed in college before, during, and after the transition from secondary to postsecondary school.

¹U.S. Department of Education (2012).

²Radford et al. (2010).

³Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006), pp. 897-900.

⁴Barnett et al. (2012b).

The Philosophy Behind the Approach

In his seminal book, *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School*, David Conley offers a comprehensive description of the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in college, including key academic content knowledge; college knowledge, or the “privileged information” needed to prepare for and apply to college and the contextual awareness skills needed to be successful there; academic behaviors, such as self-awareness and self-monitoring; and key cognitive strategies, such as intellectual openness and problem solving.⁵ The GRS Program takes a multifaceted approach to college readiness, offering an array of services in an attempt to support students in each of these areas. The philosophy behind the GRS Program posits that many students, particularly lower-income students, can benefit from a system of supports that “bridge” their transition from high school to college with programming and services — starting in the summer before senior year and offered throughout the last year of high school, the summer before college, and the first year of college. This programming can help prepare students for the academic, social, and financial challenges of postsecondary education and create stronger ties between the secondary and postsecondary portions of students’ education.

Connections to Recent NCPR Work

The GRS Program fits into a body of work being done at the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) that is focused on identifying promising strategies for preparing high school students and recent high school graduates for the transition to college. NCPR was established by MDRC in partnership with the Community College Research Center, the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University through a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

A recently released NCPR report, *Bridging the Gap: An Impact Study of Eight Developmental Summer Bridge Programs in Texas*, assesses whether four- to five-week developmental bridge programs offered during the summer before college reduce the need for developmental coursework and improve student outcomes in college.⁶ The findings show that when compared with “business as usual,” these short, intensive programs lead to higher rates of passing college-level math and writing courses in the first few semesters after the summer program, but do not show any discernible effects on cumulative academic progress after two years, nor any impact on students’ rates of college enrollment or persistence. The modest positive outcomes found in this study suggest that intensive but short-term programming may not be enough to fully prepare at-risk students for the rigors of college.

⁵Conley (2010).

⁶Barnett et al. (2012a).

One theory is that students with developmental needs may profit from a longer-term approach reaching further back into their high school careers. In an effort to better understand the extent and variety of college-readiness programming being offered before students graduate from high school, NCPR conducted an exploratory study of college-readiness partnership programs across the state of Texas, where high schools, postsecondary institutions, and intermediary organizations are partnering to bring college-readiness supports and programming to high school students. *Preparing High School Students for College: An Exploratory Study of College Readiness Partnership Programs in Texas* found a variety and range of partnership programs. These programs spanned a continuum from light-touch services that tend to focus on students' knowledge and understanding of college and are offered to many or all students at a high school, to more intensive programs that generally offer services to a smaller set of students and focus more heavily on offering academic supports.⁷

The GRS Program fits on the more intensive side of this continuum, offering academic supports, walking students through the college planning and application process, and focusing on a smaller set of students who exhibit both the need for these supports and the potential for college success. The evaluation of GRS offers an opportunity to look more closely at a specific program that includes many of the promising elements found in the various Texas programs that were reviewed in NCPR's exploratory study, including linking area high school and college programming through an intermediary organization; long-term programming that starts while students are still in high school and continues into college; academic summer bridge programming with opportunities to attend a nearby college; early assessment of students' academic abilities and aligning services based on need, incorporating academic counseling, mentoring, and workshops on applying to college and financial aid; and offering financial incentives to encourage student participation.

The GRS Program

The GRS Program is based on a CSF program that has been implemented in slightly different formats over the past 10 years. The GRS Program is a pilot that is testing the use of additional monetary incentives and summer academic programming to improve college readiness; it began in spring 2011 and targeted low-income high school juniors in two Tacoma high schools, Lincoln and Mount Tahoma. Interested students applied and were accepted based both on need (all are low-income, most are potentially first-generation college students, and many were placing below grade level on an early college placement assessment administered as part of the application process) and potential (all students exhibited a desire to attend college, were meeting requirements for high school graduation, and were recommended by school staff as displaying

⁷Barnett et al. (2012b).

positive citizenship). Approximately 50 students per school were invited to participate. The program includes a variety of components, starting in the summer before their senior year and running through their first year of college.

Summer before senior year. Over the summer between these students' junior and senior years, they attended Achievers College Experience (ACE) — a program that provided four days of residential college experience — and a three-week academic enrichment program hosted by area universities. The four-day ACE program, held at Western Washington University, brought the GRS Program students together with similar students from other schools and districts in Washington, providing them with a college campus experience and information to help them through the transition into their senior year of high school and to prepare them for the college admissions process and their transition to college. The three-week academic enrichment program was developed by the University of Washington–Tacoma in partnership with CSF especially for the GRS Program students; it included courses in mathematics and composition, with a focus on developing critical thinking skills and engendering good study habits, as well as seminars and other programming to prepare students for the rigors of college life.

Senior year of high school. During their senior year of high school, participating students worked directly with a dedicated onsite college preparatory adviser, who monitored their academic needs and college application process. The advisers worked full time at one school, and although they were CSF staff members, they were closely aligned with high school staff in an effort to support students and build relationships between high schools and area colleges and universities. The advisers conducted bimonthly group meetings with the program participants, which included a college-readiness curriculum that was aligned closely with the high schools' Navigation 101 programming.⁸ The advisers also met with students individually at least once a semester. One of the goals of the program is to inspire students to “stretch” themselves by taking a more rigorous course load in high school. To meet this goal, the advisers worked with students to choose appropriate classes and referred them to tutoring and other academic supports offered at the school to ensure they succeed. The advisers also organized workshops for students and their parents that focused on college applications and financial aid, and they facilitated relationships between the high schools and area colleges and universities to offer students more opportunities to learn about their postsecondary options. Students were also paired with a mentor. Mentors were college graduates from the school or community who guided the students through the college application process using a curriculum created by CSF.

Summer before college. In the summer after their senior year, students who are still in need of remedial support (as measured by their scores on a college entrance exam administered

⁸Navigation 101 is a college and career-readiness program for grades 6 through 12 that works to develop students' core competencies in college and career planning and decisionmaking.

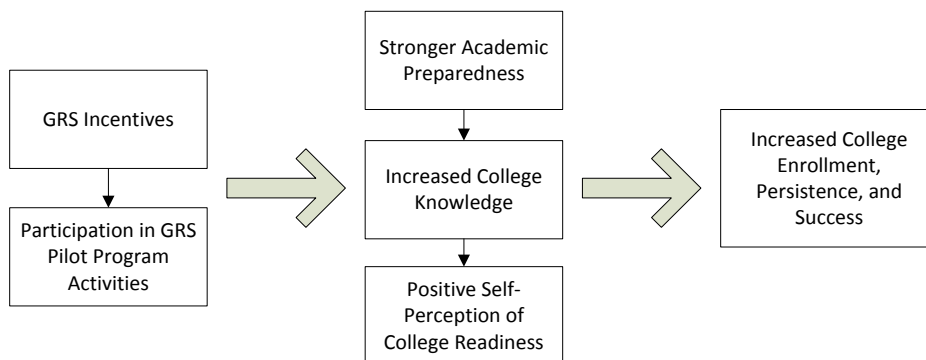
during their senior year) will have the opportunity to participate in a developmental summer bridge program at Tacoma Community College (TCC) free of charge. TCC will offer a special orientation for the GRS Program participants. Depending on their needs, students will be able to participate in a reading and/or math course to give them a head start in completing the developmental credits they will need to begin taking college credit-bearing courses or offer them extra preparation for their university entrance exams.

First year of college. Continued support in the form of advising and mentoring will be offered to all students throughout their first year of postsecondary school. The school year begins with a special orientation to the college they will be attending. CSF has partnerships with most area and state colleges and universities. The advising and mentoring on the college campus is done by college and university advisers who commit to supporting the GRS Program and its participants.

Incentives. Incentives totaling up to a maximum of \$3,000 per student will be used to motivate students' participation in and completion of the high school and summer activities, rigorous course taking in high school, and matriculation and progress in the first year of college. These incentives, allotted in small increments (between \$10 and \$400) for completing specific program activities or requirements, mostly in the form of college scholarships, are offered as extra motivation to keep students on-track to postsecondary success. Students who participated in the summer academic enrichment programming received a direct cash incentive for that activity that may have functioned less as motivator and more as a "facilitating resource" to enable them to forgo some summer employment hours in order to participate in the program.

As shown in Figure 1, the theory of change for the GRS Program posits that the monetary incentives will help to motivate students' participation in various program components, which will lead to stronger academic preparedness, increased college knowledge, and a belief in oneself as "college material" (or "self-efficacy"), and will ultimately lead to increased college enrollment, persistence, and success.

Figure 1: GRS Theory of Change



The Evaluation

College-readiness programming that reaches down into students' high school years and includes summer bridge programs to boost students' academic skills and acclimate students to college is gaining momentum as an early intervention to thwart the need for remedial coursework at the start of college. At this early juncture in this type of programming, there is little knowledge about the best way to implement programs in which both high school and postsecondary institutions play a role and multiple components are coordinated over a longer period of time. Evidence of the effectiveness of these types of programs is also limited. Incentive programs for college students have shown promise as a way to boost college persistence and success,⁹ but there is little research on the effectiveness of incentives on high school students in regard to postsecondary outcomes such as college matriculation and progress toward a credential. The evaluation of the GRS Program will offer a detailed exploration of what it takes to implement this type of programming and the promise it has to support students' academic achievement and college matriculation and persistence.

MDRC's evaluation will provide information about the feasibility of implementing the multiple student supports and incentives that make up the GRS Program. It will also provide qualitative and quantitative evidence about the promise of this intervention and the potential for implementing this type of programming more broadly. The study will assist CSF and its high school and postsecondary partners in strengthening their program and its effect on the students they serve, but could also be used more broadly by high schools, postsecondary institutions, and intermediary organizations around the country that are looking to start or strengthen college-readiness programming.

The evaluation will address the following research questions:

- What does it take to implement the GRS Program and what are the contexts, capacities, and supports needed to implement the various program components? What would it take to implement the program more broadly?
- Does the program strengthen students' awareness of how college operates and expectations for college entrance and success? How does program participation affect student attitudes, behaviors, and self-concept of college readiness?
- Does the program offer promise in terms of strengthening students' academic performance during their final year of high school, their likelihood of graduating from high school and entering college, and their persistence and success during their initial semesters in college?

⁹Scrivener and Coghlan (2011).

Implementation research. To better understand what inputs of staff, resources, and relationships between individuals and institutions are needed to operate the GRS Program, along with how students interact with and participate in the program, the study team will interview students and program and school staff and will observe program activities during periodic site visits. To assess whether students fully participate in program activities and complete program requirements, the study team will also collect data on student participation in program offerings and measure student receipt of specific incentives. Inquiry into program activities will help develop a better understanding of the implementation struggles and successes and the potential for reproduction of the program in other settings.

Student self-efficacy. To answer the second set of research questions about students’ college knowledge and self-efficacy, the study team will work with the data provided by three surveys to be administered by CSF to all GRS Program students during their junior and senior years of high school and their first year of postsecondary education. To add more context and depth to these data, the study team will also speak with a subset of program students several times throughout the program period. The analysis will look at the effect of the program on the student participants’ goals, motivation, and self-perception as “college material.”

Promise. Given the small scale of the program, with only 100 participants at two Tacoma high schools, the evaluation will not be able to directly address the impact of the intervention, as would be possible in an experimental study, but it will be able to speak to the promise of the program and its individual components. To assess the promise of the intervention, the evaluation team will collect and analyze students’ high school and college transcript data. With these data, the study team will be able to measure the program participants’ success in meeting the program goals of strengthening high school course performance and postsecondary matriculation and persistence. The study team will also compare the program participants’ outcomes with the outcomes of other similar students who are attending Tacoma Public Schools but are not receiving the full slate of GRS services.

The Participating Students

As part of the participation requirements, all the students in the study come from families considered to be low-income by the State of Washington. The program participants are a racially and ethnically diverse group: 33 percent Hispanic, 23 percent Asian, 22 percent African-American, 12 percent white, 8 percent racially mixed, and 2 percent categorized as “Other.” Sixty-eight percent of the participants are female. The program also stipulated that students display a demonstrated desire to attend college. For this reason, as shown in Table 1, most of

| <i>GPA Range</i> | <i>Distribution</i> |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 1.5-1.99 | 8% |
| 2.0-2.49 | 16% |
| 2.5-2.99 | 17% |
| 3.0-3.49 | 37% |
| 3.5-4.0 | 22% |

the students had a strong grade point average (GPA) at the time of admission, with a majority of the students having a GPA of 3.0 or higher.

But, to create an academically diverse group and to ensure it is supporting students with the most need, CSF set a target for the program that at least 45 percent of the participants test below grade level at the time of admission into the program. On the ACCUPLACER college placement assessment, 45 percent of the GRS Program students scored below grade level in at least one subject area and 25 percent scored below grade level on two or more subject tests. Table 2 shows the percentage of students scoring above, at, and below grade level on the ACCUPLACER test in math, English, and reading, respectively.

| <i>Subject</i> | <i>Percentage Scoring</i> | | |
|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>Above Grade Level</i> | <i>At Grade Level</i> | <i>Below Grade Level</i> |
| Math | 71% | 14% | 15% |
| English | 40% | 23% | 37% |
| Reading | 37% | 35% | 28% |

Student Take-up of Early Program Components

As of December 2011, a majority of GRS Program students had participated in the program services and completed program requirements. All study participants attended at least one of the two summer program activities, with 89 percent participating in ACE and 91 percent participating in the three-week summer academic enrichment program. Seventy-three percent of students signed up for a rigorous course load in the fall, which met CSF’s course requirements to “stretch” their academic skills. Thirty-six percent of students participated in all of their first six bimonthly meetings with their college prep advisers, while 55 percent participated in three to five meetings. During the fall of 2011, 78 percent of students took the SAT or ACT.

What’s Next?

Program participants are about to graduate from high school. About 34 percent will attend the developmental programming offered at Tacoma Community College this summer. Most will be attending a variety of colleges and universities across the state of Washington this fall. As part of the GRS Program, they will participate in a college orientation, work with a special college adviser and mentor, and receive monetary incentives for participating in the program and taking and passing a full load of courses throughout their first postsecondary year. MDRC will follow their program participation, their matriculation, and their persistence and success in college. MDRC will also speak with students about their impressions and experiences, and with college, university, and CSF staff in order to better understand the challenges and success of program implementation.

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.