

closing the college readiness gap

The concept of college readiness puts the focus on preparing students to succeed at college-level work or in the workforce, rather than just fulfilling eligibility requirements.

Until recently, the focus in high schools has been primarily on college eligibility requirements. The University of California has defined a course sequence of requirements (commonly referred to as the “A-G” requirements) as requisite for college eligibility, along with a specified grade point average.

However, educational leaders and policy-makers are realizing that meeting basic eligibility requirements for college may not equate to being prepared for college-level work (Conley, 2007). For example, in California, approximately 33 percent of high school seniors should be eligible to enter the California State University system. However, more than 50 percent of entering freshmen systemwide need remediation in English or mathematics (Hafner & Joseph, 2007).

The concept of college “readiness” is a new one for most high schools. It differs from traditional views in two ways. First, the focus is on preparing students to succeed in college-level work rather than on fulfilling basic eligibility requirements that are primarily course- and grade-based.

Second, college readiness is closely re-

lated to workforce preparedness, and those equipped to do well in college are also more likely to possess the skills to help them succeed in the workforce as well as in the world.

High school achievement gap carried over

The disconnect between college eligibility and college readiness has prompted a push to identify ways to close the discrepancy between high school achievement and post-secondary expectations. As educators strive to help first-time, full-time freshmen succeed at colleges and universities, the achievement gap found in most high schools is quickly carried over into a possible achievement gap in colleges and universities.

Statistics show that the dropout rate at the university level is significantly higher among those who arrive at college academically underprepared, compared with those students who have the academic skills to

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be successful in a post-secondary climate (Kirst and Bracco, 2004).

There is, understandably, an expectation that students who have satisfactorily completed the approved and required courses for college entrance are well prepared to function in freshman courses at the university. However, the need for remediation at the post-secondary level, even for those students who enter as fully qualified, has become increasingly worrisome.

As more underrepresented and low socio-economic status students attend college, they often struggle in their first year as they attempt to meet strict college readiness requirements, often requiring a year or more of remediation.

As stated by Antonio and Bersola (2004), "The level of remediation at ... the UC system as a whole is cause for public concern. The education policy question centers on the adequacy of high school preparation for university work: Why are so many students who are deemed admissible by UC eligibility and selection criteria unable to read and write at the college level?"

As educators struggle with the conceptual differences between college readiness vs. college eligibility, instructors at all levels are realizing that there needs to be a stronger alignment between what high schools are teaching and the skills and knowledge universities expect entering students to have mastered (Kirst & Bracco, 2004).

Especially important is the concept of "habits of mind," which enable students to participate in the academic community by engaging in authentic problem-solving, analytical research, supported interpretations and critical reasoning (Conley, 2006).

Moreover, clear speech and use of vocabulary within each disciplinary discourse is critical to students' college success, enabling them to actively listen, participate in discussions and communicate significant ideas comprehensibly to members of a given field.

Clearly, the expectation at most colleges and universities is for incoming students to have the ability to read expository texts critically and to write essays that are a coherent blending of the ambiguities presented in each text. However, many high school students entering college have not yet mastered

the ability to read an academic text, understand the multiple perspectives presented, and articulate a written response that is both cogent and logical (ICAS, 2002).

The intervention

Recognizing that remediation is multi-pronged and is linked to both high school achievement and college-level expectations,

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the CSU launched its largest effort ever to increase the college and career readiness rates of high school students, the Early Assessment Program.

As a major collaborative effort by three state agencies, the California State University, the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education, EAP aims to close the gap between students who are eligible and ready for college work and students who are deemed eligible, but who do not yet have the academic resources to be successful for college work.

Bringing together experts from all levels of the educational spectrum to design curriculum and instruction that supports and facilitates the transition between high school and college, the EAP includes 11th grade testing of student college readiness, professional development opportunities for high school teachers, and curriculum options for high school juniors and seniors.

Professional development initiatives

Two of the professional development initiatives that support EAP are the Reading Institutes for Academic Proficiency and the Expository Reading and Writing Course.

The CSU Reading Institutes for Academic Preparation were established in 2001-2002 with a focus on academic literacy in the core content areas. This program is intended to help high school teachers implement standards-based approaches to improving academic literacy in all content areas.

High school teachers participating in RIAP, an 80-hour professional development program, learn new ways of strategically addressing literacy issues and rhetorical concerns across subject areas, ensuring that there is a strong alignment between the expectations for a high school senior and those for a college freshman.

Following RIAP's success with teachers, the CSU has been instrumental in developing a high school-level Expository Reading and Writing Course specifically for junior- and senior-level English language arts known as the ERWC. The ERWC curriculum, developed collaboratively by CSU faculty and high school teachers and administrators, is carefully aligned with the California English Language Arts content standards for grades 11 and 12. The course offers teachers the opportunity to acquire familiarity with a wide range of strategies for reading expository texts, which are used in most university-level courses.

The course is grounded in theories of rhetoric and literacy studies, which together form the foundation for the reading and writing assignments that high school students are asked to complete. The ERWC curriculum offers teachers, as well as students, a systematic way of reading and analyzing the content of expository texts, thus helping students to deconstruct an author's arguments (Bean, Chappell & Gillam, 2007).

Subsequently, as students are encouraged to think rhetorically, paying close attention to the types of arguments authors are using, they develop awareness of and are able to deploy a range of strategies in their own expository writing.

The EAP effort as a whole shows promise. As intensive professional development has taken place to clarify how high school curricula align with college expectations, a number of schools appear to be changing direction, and students appear to be embracing opportunities offered in high school to become better prepared for the challenges they will face at college and in the communities where they will eventually live and work.

Evaluations of results

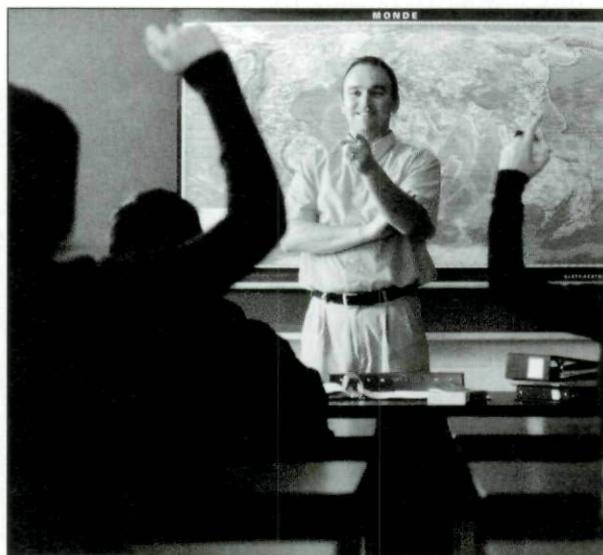
Because the effectiveness of the Early Assessment Program and subsequent interventions is very important to the CSU, a number of independent evaluations have been conducted since the implementation started. The independent evaluations have used a variety of methodologies to answer a series of questions regarding implementation and effectiveness.

An independent evaluation of the Early Assessment Program's professional development programs conducted in 2006-07 addressed the question, "What is the impact on student performance in schools where a substantial number of teachers — 10 or more — have participated in this professional development?"

The evaluation found that in schools with sizable participation in RIAP, there was a significant increase on the statewide 11th grade California Standards Test in English language arts. The gains among these students were almost four times as large as the statewide gain (14 points vs. 3.6 points) and more than twice as large as found in control schools (14 points vs. 6.7 points) (Hafner & Joseph, 2007).

Additionally, the 2006-07 evaluation found an 11 percent increase in the percentage of students proficient in English in high intensity ERWC schools over a three-year period. This is five times the statewide college proficiency rate increase (2.2 percent), and three times the increase in control group schools (Hafner & Joseph, 2007).

Another independent evaluation, conducted in 2005-2006, shows similar encouraging results. Teachers who participated in RIAP indicated a positive impact on their teaching from the program. They reported major shifts in their ability to prepare their students for college, to improve student



preparation overall, and to improve students' test performance.

Site leaders of RIAP programs affirmed these findings. They stated that the program had positive effects on teachers' instructional abilities and on student learning. In addition, the evaluation found an improvement of 11 percent in the number of students proficient in English (from 2003 to 2005) in schools in which five or more English teachers participated in ERWC workshops (Hafner & Slovacek, 2006).

Understanding what students need

Teacher comments from interviews conducted after less than one year of implementation also showed the positive impact the professional development program was having on their teaching and their students.

One teacher said, "I think [the ERWC] materials really helped me understand where my students need to be. That helps a great deal — to understand exactly what they need to do when it comes to college-level writing." (J. Sweet, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Another teacher said, "After using the ERWC for a semester, my students now

know how to go into a situation like the EPT and write successfully ... and many of them are going to college," (R. Fogel-Shrive, personal communication, May 12, 2005).

As these quotes show, students and teachers are more aware of what is needed for college success and are addressing these academic literacy issues in a systematic way, leading to college and workforce readiness.

Without a doubt, a concerted effort in professional development for teachers — with the goal of aligning high school curricula with college readiness expectations — has resulted in a marked increase in student achievement and readiness for the reading and writing tasks they will encounter at the university.

Changing the high school climate to create a stronger college-attending culture

In the most recent evaluation of CSU's professional development programs conducted by the Program Evaluation and Research Collaborative at CSU Los Angeles, the findings were very positive, showing that schools receiving the most intense professional development demonstrated the highest gains in college-going proficiency rates (Hafner & Joseph, 2007).

The PERC study demonstrated that schools that had undergone a sustained level of intervention also had the most impact on changing the school culture and climate. This creates a stronger college-attending culture among students — a key to closing the achievement gap, especially among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

It is anticipated that these promising results can be replicated on a larger scale. As effective practices are engaged and more widely implemented, high school teachers across disciplines will be better equipped to refine curriculum and teaching in ways that support young people going to college.

Focus on skills students need

Changing the state's high school culture and levels of expectation is no easy task. Initial results show that the most promising results come from sustained and intensive efforts to help high schools make the conceptual shift from preparing students to be

college eligible to educating them to be college ready.

The challenge is to continue to work with high school teachers to align secondary and post-secondary academic expectations, ensuring that students are able to effectively and efficiently gain key skills and reach college graduation in a timely manner and avoid costly remediation.

Indeed, the focus on the skills students need for college success is a goal that can be supported by universities and high schools as they work together to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. ■

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