CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH OVERVIEW / JANUARY 2016

# What We Know About Transition Courses

Throughout the country, increasing numbers of states are encouraging high schools to offer senior-year transition curricula in math and English so that graduating students are ready for college. These transition curricula are typically full-year, high school credit-bearing courses taken by students who are at risk of being placed into remedial[1] courses when they enroll in college. In many cases, students who successfully complete a transition course are officially deemed college-ready and therefore bypass developmental education upon college enrollment.

Developing an initiative or program to provide transition curricula to students can be challenging, and achieving good results requires time and commitment. Sharing approaches to implementation and outcomes findings can allow education leaders to make appropriate adjustments to existing programs or help them to start new ones. To encourage communication about transition curricula, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) convened researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from seven states in the spring of 2015 (CA, FL, IL, NJ, NY, TN, WV) to review our collective knowledge about these programs.[2] This overview provides a summary of the state of knowledge on transition courses, based on CCRC's ongoing research[3] and discussions held that day. A summary of each participating state's transition course initiative is available on the CCRC website (see *Transition Course Initiatives in Seven States*).

## Foundational Ideas

Large numbers of students—nearly two-thirds of those entering community colleges and 40 percent of those entering four-year institutions—are assigned to remedial education upon college enrollment.[4] Transition courses are designed to address skill deficiencies while students are still in high school, so that they can enroll directly into college-level courses upon entry into college. Transition courses are aimed at high school seniors whose 11th grade assessment results indicate that they are not college-ready. Ideally, the courses are designed collaboratively by high school and college educators to ensure that what students are taught in 12th grade is what they will need to know when they begin college. Transition courses are taught by high school teachers in high school classrooms and typically focus on math or English.

**DEFINITION**

**TRANSITION CURRICULA**

Transition curricula are courses, learning modules, or online tutorials 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 in college.

Initiatives and programs offering transition courses are grounded in a set of foundational ideas that guide design and implementation. Many of those who attended the spring 2015 symposium shared these ideas:

- Efforts need to be made to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the preparation needed for college, including those students who plan to go directly into the labor

market (both because college-ready skills are sought by employers and because these students may ultimately decide to go to college).

- Eleventh grade state tests provide evidence of students' progress toward college readiness. Those who are not on track should have access to 12th grade curricula that helps them become college-ready by high school graduation.
- The K-12 and higher education sectors should share responsibility for helping students to become college-ready.
- Policy environments that require or promote attention to college readiness are conducive to the implementation of transition courses.
- Collaborative work and knowledge-sharing by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers around course design, implementation, and evidence of effectiveness can make transition courses better.
- Evidence of effectiveness from both descriptive data and causal studies should guide program improvements.

The sections below summarize our knowledge of transition courses, and also highlight questions that remain about how to most effectively implement this intervention.

# Goal For College Readiness

## What We Know

**By design, transition courses aspire to help students attain full or partial readiness for college in math and/or English by the time they graduate from high school. However, *there is no universal definition of college readiness*.[5]**

- Public four-year colleges may have different college-readiness standards than community colleges or private four-year colleges. Even within sectors, there can be wide variation in the assessments and cut scores used to place students into remediation.
- There is a clear difference between college readiness defined as (1) the ability to place out of remedial education in college and (2) having the knowledge and skills needed to do well in authentic, college-level tasks and assignments.
- While college readiness overlaps with career readiness, they are not exactly the same.[6] Readiness standards at community colleges often differ based on whether students are entering career-technical or transfer-oriented program pathways.
- Some transition courses incorporate topics related to "college knowledge" that are non-academic in nature but nonetheless associated with college readiness. This material may include information on the college application process, financial aid, and college placement testing procedures.
- Different college readiness standards may be in tension with each other. For example, research indicates that preparing for and succeeding on placement tests is very different from preparing for and succeeding in college courses.[7]

**There can be wide variation in the assessments and cut scores used to place students into remediation.**

### What We Need to Know

*What are the pros and cons of a universal definition of college readiness that high schools and colleges agree upon? If a universal definition is not possible, how should high schools select a meaningful definition?*

*Should transition courses try to achieve multiple goals (e.g., preparation for success on college placement tests and preparation for success in college courses)?*

## Content and Pedagogy

### What We Know

**Transition courses focus on math and English (reading and writing), but the specific content and the level of expectations required in particular courses depend on a number of factors. These include:**

- What the course content is aligned to (e.g., Common Core State Standards, introductory college course content, ACT or SAT admission test material).
- The priorities of the group overseeing or leading the initiative (e.g., whether they emphasize placing into college-level courses, acquiring writing skills, or taking four years of high school math).
- The extent to which K-12 teachers and higher education faculty are involved in course development, their disciplinary perspectives, and the assumptions that they bring to curriculum development.

**Some English transition courses incorporate content from other disciplines.**

- The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) English college-readiness (transition) course incorporates two units each of history and science.[8]
- New York City's At Home in College transition course in English is organized around a semester of psychology content and a semester of sociology content. It also embeds a "college knowledge" component to help students navigate the logistical demands of the transition to college.

**A "college knowledge" component may be embedded in a course to help students navigate the logistical demands of the transition to college.**

**Some transition courses are essentially college developmental education courses that are taught in the high school setting.**

- The Tennessee SAILS program brings the state community colleges' developmental math sequence to high school seniors via a blended learning format.[9] Students who pass the course can bypass remedial math and enroll directly in college-level math at any Tennessee community college. Or they can take dual enrollment math in high school.

**Some course developers strive to make the instructional methods used in transition courses different from "regular" high school pedagogy to avoid teaching students in ways that have not worked well for them in the past.**

- High school teachers who teach in Tennessee's SAILS program receive training from college instructors on effective blended learning pedagogy.
- In California, the Expository Reading and Writing Course increases the pace and rigor of teaching and learning, relative to typical high school courses, in order to make the course experience more collegiate.
- Some math and English transition courses include a substantial emphasis on project-based learning and opportunities to conduct research.[10]

### What We Need to Know

*Do any of these approaches result in better student outcomes?*

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of using more college-like pedagogies in transition courses?*

## Placing Students Into College-Level Coursework

### What We Know

**Some transition courses have built-in mechanisms that allow students to place out of developmental education in college. Without these mechanisms, some students who could succeed in college-level work may unnecessarily take developmental education courses in college.**

- Students taking transition courses place into college-level work in one of two ways: (1) by passing a college placement test administered at the end of the course, or (2) through an agreement in which colleges recognize completion of the course as formal evidence of college readiness.
- If higher education institutions do not administer an end-of-course placement test (as is done in some courses), the results of a high-school administered test may not reach the institution where the student matriculates after leaving high school. For example, in West Virginia, transition course students take the COMPASS test, but the results are not automatically sent to colleges.

**Some students taking transition courses place into college-level work by passing a college placement test administered at the end of the course.**

### What We Need to Know

*Do certain transition course placement mechanisms result in fewer students being placed into developmental education in college?*

# Targeting and Serving Students

## What We Know

**Students who enroll in transition courses do not cecessarily plan to attend college.**

- Students are generally placed into transition courses based on test scores rather than their plans for the future.
- There are two groups of students most often targeted for participation: (1) those who score below a particular cut score on a standardized test, and (2) those who score *just below* the cut score; that is, those who are considered nearly college-ready. Thus, classes may be more/less homogeneous.

**Students are generally placed into transition courses based on test scores rather than their plans for the future.**

**Non-targeted students are sometimes enrolled in transition courses due to practical considerations (e.g., the need to fill a class), judgment calls (e.g., a counselor believes a student would benefit by participating), or parent and student preferences.**

- The California Expository Reading and Writing Course was originally targeted for students who were conditionally or "not quite" ready for college-level work. However, it has been adopted by some high schools as the default senior-year English course.
- In West Virginia, the Transition Math for Seniors transition course is intended for students who place just below the cut score on the state's 11$^{th}$ grade standardized test, but a number of students who are above the cut score also take the course.

**Most teachers report that it is challenging to instruct in transition courses that include students with a wide range of proficiency levels.**

- At the same time, there are some teachers who like having a mix of different levels in their courses.

## What We Need to Know

*Are transition courses more effective for some types of students, such as those who score close to the college-readiness benchmark rather than those who score far below it?*

*Is it more effective or less effective to include students with a wide range of proficiencies in the same transition course?*

*Do students who do not plan to attend college benefit from transition courses?*

*Should there be different "intensities" of transition interventions (e.g., a single module, a semester, or a year-long course) depending on students' level of need?*

# Companion Strategies to Promote Readiness

### What We Know

**Transition courses are not the whole solution to ensuring that students are prepared for college. Using them along with other strategies and practices makes sense. Companion strategies could include:**

- Boot camps and summer bridge programs.
- Curriculum enhancements that start in middle or early high school.
- College on-ramp interventions for adult students.
- Better alignment of K-12 curriculum to skills required for college.
- Guidance and support in applying to college and in determining costs and financial aid options.
- Better college remedial course offerings.
- Interventions, such as "college knowledge" courses, designed to expose high school students to career options and to encourage students to select college majors and courses with career goals in mind.

### What We Need to Know

*Which strategies or practices that are complementary to transition courses lead to better student outcomes?*

# Professional Development for Instructors

### What We Know

**There is some amount of professional development offered in all states in which transition courses are offered. However, not all teachers participate.**

- All states offer initial professional development, but generally teachers are on their own after the initial training.
  - Of the seven states discussed here, only the Expository Reading and Writing Course in California requires initial professional development for all participating teachers.
  - Ongoing professional development is universal only with the SAILS program in Tennessee and the At Home in College program in New York City.
- Only New York City's At Home in College program offers professional development to high school counselors, as they are responsible for teaching a portion of the transition course curriculum.

**All states offer initial professional development, but generally teachers are on their own after the initial training.**

### What We Need to Know

*Does professional development related to transition courses contribute to better outcomes for students?*

*Is teacher professional development cost-effective?*

# Roles of Secondary and Postsecondary Sectors

## What We Know

**In some states, higher education systems organize the development and implementation of transition courses (e.g., TN, CA, NY, NJ). In other states, the K-12 sector does so (e.g., WV, FL, IL).**

**Transition course development is made more difficult when K-12 and higher education standards are not aligned.**

**Higher education often plays a number of roles in developing and sustaining transition courses, such as:**

- Creating courses independently or with K-12 involvement.
- Providing professional development and/or ongoing teacher support.
- Obtaining and/or distributing funding.
- Determining the mechanisms that permit students in transition courses to place out of remediation in college.

**The K-12 and higher education partners that offer transition courses are often engaged in other partnership activities such as dual enrollment.**

## What We Need to Know

*In what role can higher education best contribute to effective transition courses?*

*What is needed to better align K-12 and higher education standards and curriculum so that there is more continuity across education sectors?*

# Funding and Policy in Development and Scale-Up

## What We Know

**State policies and funding grants are major drivers of transition course development and scale-up.**

- State legislation has played a major role in the expansion of transition courses in many states. For example, legislation resulted in the statewide adoption of transition courses in Florida, West Virginia, Illinois, Tennessee, and New Jersey.
- The adoption of Common Core State Standards and related assessments have focused attention on 12th grade interventions to increase college readiness.
- While the costs of implementing transition courses are generally modest, funds are often required to set them up and/or sustain them. For example, in New York City, the Robin Hood Foundation funded initial implementation of the transition course. In Tennessee, a governor's grant was used to scale up transition courses statewide. Illinois used Race to the Top funding to support expansion of transition courses.

**State legislation has played a major role in the expansion of transition courses in many states.**

### What We Need to Know

*Which policies or combinations of policies are most supportive of effective transition courses?*

*What does it cost to develop and sustain transition courses? Are they cost-effective?*

## Research on Effectiveness

### What We Know

**A variety of indicators are being used or considered in evaluations of the impact of transition courses, depending on initiative goals/theories of change as well as the availability of data.**

- Most evaluations of transition courses focus on two indicators: (1) college readiness at the end of high school or beginning of college, and (2) performance in the first college-level math and English courses.
- Other indicators being used or suggested are: (1) high school graduation, (2) measures of learning, (3) accumulation of college credits, (4) persistence in college, and (5) completion of a postsecondary credential.

**Most evaluations of transition courses focus on college readiness at the end of high school or beginning of college, and on performance in the first college-level math and English courses.**

**Research findings on the effectiveness of transition courses are mixed.**

- Using a matching analysis, WestEd researchers evaluated the impact of California's Expository Reading and Writing Course on students' English Placement Test (EPT) score, a standardized test given to students entering the California State University (CSU) system, during the 2013-14 academic year. The researchers found a positive impact, with an estimated effect size of 0.13 standard deviations.
- In fall 2014, 42 percent of At Home in College's most recent high school graduate cohort enrolled in CUNY degree programs, compared with 37 percent of the comparison group. By the end of their senior year in high school, over half of program students taking the English course achieved proficiency in reading and writing, which is more than 20 percentage points higher than that of comparison group students.[12]
- In West Virginia, analyses suggest that the Transition Math for Seniors course offered in 2011-12 and 2012-13 was less effective than alternative math offerings.[13]
- In Tennessee, 71 percent of fall 2014 students who enrolled in SAILS placed into college-level math; 91 percent finished at least four of the five modules required to be considered college-ready in math.[14]
- Additional research is underway in other states.

### What We Need to Know

*What is the impact of transition courses on indicators of student success?*

# Generating High Quality Research

## What We Know

**Where possible, researchers are using rigorous methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition courses.**

- Access to student unit record data and good relationships with the centers that house relevant data are conducive to well-designed, timely studies.
- The ability to conduct meaningful causal studies depends, in part, on whether transition courses are implemented as intended. It is hard to estimate an effect if implementation is uneven or varies widely from place to place.
- The availability of funding and research expertise has led to causal studies that are currently underway to evaluate transition courses in California, Florida, New York City, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

**The availability of funding and research expertise has led to causal studies that are currently underway in several states.**

**Regular communication between practitioners and researchers can contribute to well-conceived studies (as well as better programs).**

- Useful discussion topics could include selection criteria for participation in courses, whether student participation should be mandatory or voluntary, how to address design, implementation, or research challenges, and how to improve the dissemination of knowledge.

## What We Need to Know

*What research topics and methods best address the needs of policymakers and practitioners?*

*How can research best examine student outcomes among different populations?*

*To what extent does fidelity to program design and implementation affect research outcomes?*

*How can communication between research teams and practitioners be improved?*

# Final Thoughts

Transition courses can be an important way to help prepare students for college. While we need to learn more about how to optimize designs to produce successful outcomes, it is encouraging to witness the ongoing work being done to help students master college-preparatory math and English while in high school. Of course, the strengthening of other aspects of the high school to college-and-career transition is also important. Throughout their years in high school, all students should be immersed in a curriculum that prepares them to perform well in college and careers. In addition, all high school students should have the chance to engage in meaningful exploration of education and career options and planning beyond high school. Ensuring that students are afforded these opportunities would contribute a great deal to smoothing the transition to college.

# Endnotes

1. We use the terms "remedial" and "developmental" interchangeably throughout this piece.
2. This convening was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
3. See http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/early-assessment-curricular-interventions.html. Also see Barnett, Fay, & Pheatt (2015) and Barnett, Fay, Trimble, & Pheatt (2013).
4. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2013).
5. Wiley, A., Wyatt, J., & Camara, W. J. (2010).
6. Association for Career and College Readiness (2010).
7. Scott-Clayton, J. (2012); Scott-Clayton & Stacey, G. W. (2015).
8. Southern Regional Education Board. (2014).
9. See, e.g., Chattanooga State Community College. (n.d.).
10. For alternative pedagogies, see Ambrose, Bridges, Dipietro, Lovett, & Norman. (2010).
11. Fong, Finkelstein, Jaeger, Diaz, & Broek. (2015).
12. We expect these findings to appear in a future report by the Office of Research at the City University of New York.
13. These findings will appear in a future CCRC working paper.
14. We expect these findings to appear in a future report by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University.

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