

Student Centered: Designing a Model College Readiness Course

By Raymond Gerson and Carolyn Mendiola

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Editor's note: This article was written collaboratively, but for purposes of style, we have edited it from the perspective of Mr. Gerson.

Are high school students prepared for college? Maybe not. Research shows that almost 60 percent of college freshmen need to take remedial courses, according to a special report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board. The report also showed that about 75 percent of those students never graduate from college. So, what's wrong with the college readiness programs high schools are offering to their students today?

Many high school college readiness programs are either academically or college knowledge- focused. Academically focused programs usually teach reading, writing, and math to prepare students for standardized college readiness performance tests. College knowledge-focused programs are about college planning, applying to college, financial aid, and managing life in college. While all of these are important components of a college readiness course or program, they're not enough by themselves, or even when combined, to get the job done.

What's missing? Other noncognitive factors should also be addressed, including learning strategies, study skills, attendance, work habits, time management, goal setting, self-regulatory skills, help-seeking behaviors, metacognitive strategies, problem-solving

skills, academic perseverance, and the development of a positive academic mindset.

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research reviewed hundreds of studies that showed strong correlations between these noncognitive factors and academic success. There are more than four decades of research on academic mindset, and the conclusion is clear: The beliefs that students have about themselves as learners influence their performance in school.

College Readiness Goes Beyond Academics

An innovative course approved by the Texas State Board of Education that includes cognitive skills and noncognitive factors may ultimately serve as a model for college readiness courses nationwide. This course—called College Transition—is approved for grades 10–12 (and some ninth graders) in Texas high schools. It is an elective and can be offered as a one-semester course for half a credit or as a two-semester course for one credit.

College Transition was designed to equip students with knowledge and skills for successful performance in both high school and college. Students learn research-based strategies for academic success, such as time management, goal setting, note taking, reading strategies, problem-solving skills, how to conduct research, and more.

This course also teaches students how to research scholarships and grants, complete college applications, and explore requirements of different colleges and universities. Additionally, the course has a strong career readiness and exploration component. Any textbooks and materials that meet the essential knowledge and skills requirements can be used to teach the course.

College Transition can be taught as a high school class by anyone with a valid Texas Teacher Certification. When offered as a college

course, it must be taught by an instructor who has a master's degree with 18 graduate hours in either psychology or education.

Implementing a College Transition Course

During the spring of 2014, Principal Carolyn Mendiola of Sharyland Advanced Academic Academy in Mission, TX, started planning the course load for College Transition for incoming freshmen. Creating a college-like atmosphere was critical from day one, with an emphasis on preparation to meet the Texas Success Initiative (TSI). Résumé building, college exploration, leadership skills, and other activities aligned to college prep were included. The school planned field trips to various universities across the state, as well as frequent presentations from college recruiters and counselors, community members, and businesspeople.

As every educator knows, without a "guaranteed and viable curriculum," as I've stated, you cannot expect alignment between instruction and assessment. Knowing this, Mendiola asked one teacher to work over the summer (with compensation, of course) to develop the College Transition curriculum. Teacher Pamela Buentello used textbooks and accompanying instructor materials to develop the curriculum. Textbooks used in the course were *Achieve College Success: Learn How in 20 Hours or Less*; *Achieve Career Success: Discover and Get the Job You Want*, all by Raymond Gerson. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* and *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make: A Guide for Teens* by Sean Covey were also used. In addition to the textbooks, Mendiola and Buentello created extra reading and writing prep materials to be used in the course. The two worked together to utilize various resources, with the main resource being *Achieve College Success*. This provided everything the teacher needed to focus on college prep, including lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations, and assessments.

Mendiola inserted a 50-minute, yearlong College Transition course into the 90-minute accelerated block schedule and required that every freshman take the course during this period. Students were not allowed to substitute any other elective for College Transition. In the fall of 2014 and spring of 2015, Sharyland Advanced Academic Academy offered College Transition to all of its ninth-grade students. This school was a new Early College High School (ECHS) that opened in the fall of 2014.

As principal, Mendiola set high expectations for the faculty and students, which helped to develop positive mindsets. She chose teachers who had a passion for teaching the course. Four teachers taught the course, while a fifth teacher ran the TSI lab once a week during the College Transition course for the college readiness exam.

Tracking Success

The coursework and the structure of the course proved to be successful. Fifty-four percent of freshmen passed the Reading TSI on their first attempt. Students were excited, encouraged, and motivated once they got a taste of success. They looked forward to the course, and during the second semester, they received instruction on career preparation utilizing my *Achieve Career Success* book. At the end of the spring semester, 86 percent of students were eligible to start taking dual-credit courses. (There are a wide variety of dual-credit courses so that most of these students could begin taking them based on their reading and writing scores.)

Buentello reported results for ninth-grade students who took the College Transition course with the TSI in May 2015: 86 percent of the students met the TSI standard for reading, and 73 percent met the TSI standard for writing. This contrasted sharply with the results in math, which was not taught as part of the College Transition course—only 15 percent passed.

The results show that providing a College Transition course can have a dramatic effect. In order to significantly increase college completion rates, high schools require a shift from the focus on standardized test scores to emphasizing the teaching of cognitive and noncognitive factors that help students earn good grades in high school. College readiness courses need to be started early, be comprehensive, be required for credit, and have the support of the administration and high school principal. High school principals who want to offer students the opportunity to take a college transition course can evaluate models such as the ones at Sharyland Advanced Academic Academy and Sharyland High School, which already have demonstrated excellent results.

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Sidebar: Making It Work

Three keys to making a college transition program a success in your school:

Make it comprehensive. Include an academic and college knowledge-focus in your college transition plan. Incorporate teaching noncognitive skills for at least one semester.

Support and involve the high school principal. The principal must set the expectations for the importance of the course, assign excellent and enthusiastic teachers, and preferably make the course mandatory for credit.

Provide excellent college and career readiness materials. Students need excellent books and materials, and teachers need proper instructional resources.

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