



WHY 12TH GRADE MUST BE REDESIGNED NOW—AND HOW

By Joel Vargas | Ready or Not: It's Time to Rethink the 12th Grade
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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

In their last year of high school, young people are on the cusp of college, career, and legal adulthood. Yet despite the aspirations for their future that they, their parents, and their teachers express, many experience frustration and failure in trying to take the critical first step into postsecondary education after graduating from high school. The bumpiness of the high school to college transition has focused attention once again on what have long been perceived as weaknesses of the senior year. As critics have pointed out, whether or not a 12th grader is ready for what comes next, the last nine months of K-12 education tend to focus much more on concluding and rewarding prior years of schooling (e.g., a diploma, college admission, rites of passage such as senior prom, the chance to relax a little) than palpably preparing for life after high school.

The emphasis today on college and career readiness for all further heightens the concerns about what does—and doesn't—happen in 12th grade, especially to help low-income and first-generation students prepare for what lies ahead. These young people are more likely to attend less rigorous schools and have lower academic preparation. They also have fewer social networks and experiences that can help smooth a transition to college or career. Setting aside for the moment that they are more likely to drop out before senior year, if they do get to college, they are more likely to be placed in remedial courses and are less likely to graduate.

Demand from parents, colleges, and business leaders for high schools to better prepare graduates for postsecondary education and training is escalating and will continue to grow. There are many reasons why. Primary are economic realities that workers increasingly need a postsecondary credential to be competitive in the labor market. Higher education is also facing rising pressure for performance from

policymakers and the public. They want to see a return on student, family, and state investments in postsecondary education. States are pressing community colleges, in particular, to improve completion rates and labor market outcomes for their graduates. Such pressure, in turn, results in pressure on K-12 to better prepare young people.

To date, the primary response of states to such demand has been to adopt the Common Core State Standards, or develop other state college- and career-ready standards. While raising college and career success rates requires attention at every step of K-12 education, these new ambitious standards make this a pivotal time to focus on the 12th grade in particular. Spurred by years of steady shifts in the economy, the standards outline what students should know and be able to do by the end of high school, and are well calibrated to the expectations of college and career. After 11th graders complete culminating assessments aligned to these standards¹ and receive their results, they, their parents, and their schools will know more than they ever have about their level of readiness for college-level work in math and English, key gateways to the rest of the college curriculum and skills valued by employers.

As more states roll out results from these new assessments over the next several years, a lot of parents will start asking high schools what they plan to do in the senior year to ensure their children become college and career ready by graduation. By one existing measure of college readiness, the ACT, only 26 percent of high school students may be prepared.² If state education and political leaders fail to answer these questions, assumptions about the utility of instituting these and future standards currently under consideration (e.g., state science standards) may be questioned.

Such problems cannot be fixed by K-12 systems acting alone. Both high schools and colleges have an interest in making sure students leave high school prepared to succeed in college and beyond. In many places, the students who are finishing high school are the very ones who will show up a few months later, ready or not, at the doors of local

public colleges. The developmental and academic needs of students in 12th grade

and the first year of college are quite similar. Yet there are few, if any, incentives for high schools and colleges to share responsibility where their interests converge and work together to promote student success during this critical period.

This paper is the first of a series proposing that the 12th grade be restructured to make college and career readiness a reality for all young people. The ultimate vision is of a shared transition zone where high schools and colleges take joint responsibility for college and career readiness of students in grades 12 and 13. The two separate education systems that made sense when a high school diploma could lead to a living wage need updating now that some kind of postsecondary credential is a prerequisite for a decent standard of living. This undertaking would involve not only organizational change and instructional change, but also significant cultural change.

To better understand all that's involved in developing a shared transition zone, Jobs for the Future convened thought leaders in high school and community college reform to share research, expertise, and best practices. In 2014-15, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, JFF held three meetings with these innovators and researchers to develop the ideas that led to this series. (See *Appendix for a list of participants.*)

The series of five papers delves into topics that emerged as vital to this agenda. High schools and colleges will need to partner in new ways to take aim at a series of concrete goals that make a difference in student outcomes. They will need to use a range of diagnostic indicators to design and implement experiences that promote a full set of skills and

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habits needed for college and career success. Accordingly, the papers include discussion of:

- > the principles of *co-design*, *co-delivery*, and *co-validation* that must guide the new partnerships between high school and college campuses and systems;
- > the research-based markers and milestones of student momentum from 12th grade through the first year of college and how high schools and colleges should ensure students reach them;
- > the multifaceted skills and habits that are now understood to constitute college and career readiness and how they can be supported in a shared transition zone; and
- > the strategies high schools and colleges can employ to examine and use data to inform the closer collaboration that will be needed to support student success.

In this paper, the first in the series, we begin by proposing a new common benchmark of readiness that high schools and colleges can work together to meet to ensure that no time is wasted in getting and keeping students on track to succeed in college. The paper then describes promising precedents of K-12-postsecondary partnership practices that can be instructive in redesigning the 12th grade. But it also addresses the formidable challenges, highlighting the inherent norms underlying our education systems that must be changed if we are to succeed in creating a shared transition zone. We conclude with ideas for how state policymakers and local practitioners can start the shift to a new normal.

Guiding Principles for Secondary-Postsecondary Partnerships

Co-Design

Deciding together on courses, curricular pathways, and support systems—as well as professional development opportunities and data platforms—that impact what and how students learn.

Co-Delivery

Sharing execution of design elements by implementing together or in a coordinated way.

Co-Validation

Using agreed upon assessments of learning and measurement of results to determine proficiency, including for placement in credit-bearing, college-level courses.

A NEW BENCHMARK OF COLLEGE READINESS AND SUCCESS FOR ALL

The ultimate goal of improving the transition from grade 12 through the first year of college must be to launch every student toward postsecondary credentials—Associate’s degrees, Bachelor’s degrees, and certificates—leading to good jobs and careers. Because entering 12th graders will exhibit a wide range of levels of readiness, high schools and colleges will need to develop a variety of structures and strategies in order to support every student, creating multiple routes to the same result of a postsecondary credential with high labor market value.

Achieving this ambitious goal requires a clear interim objective to serve as a benchmark of progress. It should both hold significance as a milestone toward college completion and be conceivably within reach for a broad range of students within a two-year period. We propose that this key marker be whether students have completed, by the end of their first year of college, at least one credit-bearing, college-level introductory course in a program of study in English or math.³ The Common Core State Standards for K-12 aim for students to be prepared for non-remedial work in these subject areas, and these courses are the gateway to more advanced courses in general education and technical curricula.

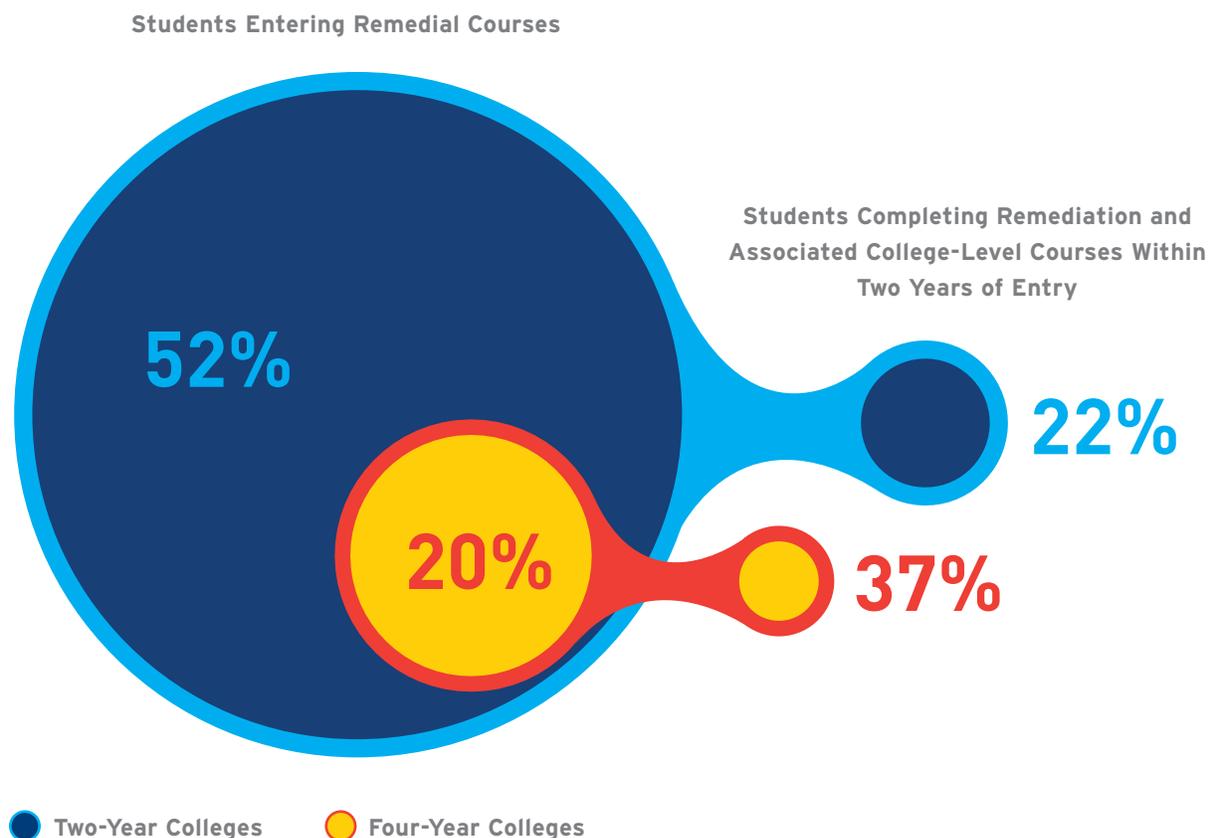
This is not at all to suggest a ceiling for every student by the end of grade 13, but rather a floor. Too many students, especially underserved youth, are unable to reach this milestone because they are floundering in remedial courses in these subjects in their first year of college.

About 52 percent of students entering two-year colleges and 20 percent entering four-year colleges start in remedial courses (Figure 1). They are disproportionately represented by students from low-income families; 65 percent of low-income students require remediation in two-year colleges and 32 percent require remediation in four-year colleges. More troubling, only about 22 percent of students taking remedial courses at community colleges and 37 percent of students taking remedial courses at four-year colleges are able to complete these courses and the associated gateway course within two years of entry (Figure 1).⁴

Improving these outcomes is critical for all students and particularly for low-income and other underserved youth. All students reaching the milestone of completing a credit-bearing course in their first year of college would demonstrate that they are not only prepared for college-level work, but that they also have built some momentum toward successfully completing a credential, which so many fail to do now. However, high school students can and should be encouraged to reach this milestone early, through completion of these courses as dual enrollees at a local college before their official college entry. Those who do achieve the goal early would keep moving to other milestones toward college completion.

Figure 1.

Too many high school graduates enter college in remedial courses, and few of these students complete these courses and the associated gateway course within two years of entry.



Source: Complete College America. 2012. *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*.

STARTING WITH PROMISING PRACTICES

So what would strategies to propel all students toward successful completion of one college-level, credit-bearing course by the end of their first year of postsecondary education look like? In this section, we describe practices that have evidence of preparing youth for college and career in order to provide educators and policymakers with some direction.⁵

All would need to be designed, delivered, and validated, to some extent, by both the secondary and postsecondary systems involved. (Another paper in this series describes these principles, which we call “co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation,” in detail. Also, see box on page 3.) However, it is important to understand that no single practice—or even all of these practices together—would be able to create or sustain a shared transition zone without high school and college partners addressing the systemic problems described later in this paper. We note them here to illustrate the kinds of evidence-based activities that high schools and colleges might use to ground their initial steps to share students in the transition zone.

The following list organizes the examples by the groups of students they target: those deemed college ready by the beginning of 12th grade, those deemed not yet ready, and all seniors, regardless of official readiness status.

STUDENTS “READY” BY 12TH GRADE WOULD BENEFIT FROM

- **Dual Enrollment:** Students who enter 12th grade having shown proficiency on college- and career-readiness assessments would be able to take and complete gateway college courses as dual enrollment students while still in high school. Dual enrollment would be co-validated by colleges and high schools through “dual credit,” each institution granting credit for successful course completion.
- **Progression in a Program of Study:** Some college-ready students will be able to meet the milestone of completing a gateway credit-bearing college course before second semester of senior year. These students could begin a program of study in a particular field toward an Associate’s degree or other credential.

STUDENTS “NOT READY” BY 12TH GRADE WOULD BENEFIT FROM

- **Transition Courses:** Students completing the 11th grade who do not demonstrate readiness on 11th-grade assessments could take transition courses in 12th grade that are designed to fill in academic gaps and prepare them for credit-bearing college coursework in math or English by the end of high school. Successful completion would be co-validated by high schools that grant credit toward graduation and by colleges that promise placement in credit-bearing gateway courses upon entry.⁶
- **Accelerated Developmental Education:** Another possible trajectory for underprepared seniors would be to enter an accelerated developmental education route that many community colleges have designed to speed progression into credit-bearing coursework for underprepared college entrants. Options may include a system of modules that identify and target key gaps in skills and knowledge and enable students to move on to other modules upon completion, or to begin credit-bearing college work once they have mastered all identified gaps.
- **Dual Enrollment with Co-Requisite Course for Academic Support:** Some underprepared college

students have benefited from pilot programs to bypass developmental education. Instead of starting the first year of college in remedial courses, students go directly into gateway courses and receive academic support through simultaneous enrollment in a co-requisite course that may include supplemental instruction, tutoring, and peer-learning groups. These models have potential to be translated into the 12th grade for some students.

ALL 12TH GRADERS, WHETHER DEEMED “READY” OR NOT, WOULD BENEFIT FROM

- **College Success Course:** Whether or not students enter 12th grade proficient in math and English, many would benefit from a college success course that coaches them in the habits and routines of successful college students. A typical curriculum includes how to manage time, handle hefty reading assignments, and practice important study skills and learning strategies. Currently, many of these courses carry college credit and could be part of dual enrollment programs. With or without credit, they send an important signal to students and families that college is attainable with the right effort and know-how.
- **Community Service and Internships:** Some schools have recognized and harnessed the power of learning experiences for a wide range of students outside of school walls as a way to enrich learning and preparation for life after high school. These may include community service, industry internships, school-based business enterprises, and capstone projects that demonstrate the acquisition and application of key knowledge. More such experiences could be co-designed and co-validated, counting toward high school graduation and college credit, and become part of a student’s portfolio of evidence demonstrating readiness for college and career.

Although these practices from grade 12 through the first year of college have shown promise in programs around the country, it would be a mistake to act as if merely cobbling them together can constitute a complete solution. The skill and knowledge gaps of

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each student are likely to vary widely, requiring a broad range of options geared to meet the needs of each individual learner. For example, students who arrive at senior year with significant gaps will require well-designed and nimble support systems, intensive supplemental instruction, and varying amounts of time within the two-year senior-through-freshman timeframe to reach the marker of college readiness and success proposed in this paper.

Moreover, creating individual courses or programs, even successful ones, is insufficient to reach the scale of change we're discussing. In the next section, we discuss the systemic issues that must be addressed, specifically the institutional cultures and standard operating procedures needed for high schools and colleges to share responsibility for student success across the divide between 12th grade and the first year of college. Many of these programs manage to exist in spite of misaligned norms and policies in high school and college, while some neither thrive, nor survive.

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS

Programmatic approaches have been designed to solve some of the problems that pose barriers to better preparing students for life after high school. However, any shared effort by K-12 and postsecondary systems to redesign the grade-12-to-college transition zone must address larger systemic issues that have interfered with past attempts to address these problems.

READINESS MEASURES ARE BASED ON NARROW BANDS OF SKILL

Most access to college-prep and college-level curricula relies heavily, if not solely, on assessments of knowledge in math and English. The advent of better assessments and better standards should improve the accuracy and quality of information that educators can use in determining the extent to which an individual possesses these skills.

But there is growing awareness among educators, researchers, and business that college and career readiness encompasses more than the academic knowledge and skills. Groundbreaking work by researchers such as Carol Dweck, David Conley, Angela Duckworth, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows that success in schooling and other learning endeavors is a function of factors beyond prerequisite knowledge in academic subjects. It is also a matter of skills, beliefs, strategies, and behaviors that enable young people to persist at the challenge of developing new understanding and ideas, solving problems, and navigating systems to reach a goal.

Consistent with this broader view, the College Readiness Indicators Project (CRIS) has developed a useful framework for identifying and measuring a fuller set of college and career readiness skills: academic preparedness, academic tenacity, and college knowledge. Another paper in this series addresses these issues at length. But to summarize here:

- **“Academic preparedness** refers to key academic content knowledge and cognitive strategies needed to succeed in doing college-level work
- **Academic tenacity** refers to the underlying beliefs and attitudes that drive student achievement
- **College knowledge** is the knowledge base and contextual skills that enable students to successfully access and navigate college”⁷

These skills tend to have some correspondence. Students who possess academic tenacity are probably more likely to become academically prepared and persist at gaining college knowledge, even if it’s only as a result of trial and error. Yet any given 12th-grader, regardless of age, is likely to be at varying stages of development within and across these readiness domains. Just one example: Low-income and first-generation college students who are academically prepared often don’t have the experience or social networks that support college knowledge, such as understanding the kinds of colleges that would be a good fit or taking steps to access financial aid.

Strategies that provide early college experiences through dual enrollment and college-success courses are designed to provide a tangible context and experience (i.e., college) in which students can authentically learn and hone a more complete complement of skills. They give students a chance, with support, to gain and show college skills through exposure and rehearsal rather than presuming that they must demonstrate all prerequisite skills before availing themselves of high-level learning opportunities. For example, Early College High Schools immerse low-income students in a college-going context and culture by incorporating college credit into the high school curriculum. If students do not pass college placement tests on the first attempt, they are provided with multiple

opportunities to try again, after taking advantage of a wide variety of supports, such as tutoring, college-prep courses, and coaching in how to be an effective college student. In the interim, they may even take “college success courses” for college credit and other courses that do not require a placement test in order to stay on a college path.

A shared grade-12-to-college transition zone ought to extrapolate from such approaches. The design of paths from senior through freshman year should include access to experiences and supports for students based on multiple indicators of their postsecondary readiness and be designed to build their readiness in multiple domains.

K-12 AND POSTSECONDARY SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMS ARE RISK-AVERSE

There’s a tendency for both secondary and postsecondary schools and systems to lean toward slower, lower-level options for underprepared students. A prime example is that past performance is often used conservatively in course-placement decisions out of fear that students will take courses that stretch them too far, resulting in failure without credit. In K-12, this partly stems from pressure to graduate students before they become too old—by policy or social pressure—to continue high school. Making sure that students have enough credit to graduate on time can take primacy as a goal.

In postsecondary education, remedial courses are typically paid for, like any other course enrollment, by state enrollment-based funding. Remediation is also supported by federal financial aid, though there is some time pressure on students to finish within a certain time frame of starting college before maxing out their eligibility.

There are definitely humane and rationale motivations for not wanting to put unprepared students in over their heads, and to change any of these policies could create more unintended problems than it solves, such as seeing more students fail. But the current context enables, if not encourages, the natural tendencies of many young people to obligingly take educational paths of lower rigor and resistance unless they are otherwise

pushed. Many more could tackle rigorous courses and succeed with the right supports. Investing time to design and deliver effective support services should yield more successful students who are engaged by challenges instead of discouraged by redundant remediation or “sink-or-swim” exposure to rigorous content.

A new grade-12-through-first-year-of-college transition zone should default to more challenging and accelerated learning trajectories for students, combined with supports. There are emerging models that show acceleration is more effective than remediation. For example, many underprepared college entrants who typically would be placed into developmental education could instead simultaneously take a college credit-bearing course and a co-requisite course that provide real-time catch-up support in learning key skills and content needed for success.⁸

SCHOOLING IS TYPICALLY CONFINED TO CLASSROOMS

By and large, schools still largely hold the monopoly on learning time in our country. That is primarily because there is a public financing, professional, and political infrastructure built around them as the place where young people learn, and there are no incentives to broker other learning environments for students. For similar reasons, colleges are not much different in their use of classrooms as the place where learning occurs.

New research about practices that organize, emphasize, and engage learning around students’ motivations, understandings, and experiences is confirming that making tangible the relevance and application of knowledge in authentic contexts can engage students in more meaningful learning and skill development.⁹ Successful strategies such as Linked Learning, which started in California, “connect strong academics with real-world experience in a wide range of fields, helping students gain an advantage in high school, college, and career.”¹⁰ This can often include a work-based learning experience that connects students to places and people from local industry through

projects, internships, and mentorships—making real the application of what can otherwise feel abstract. Community-based organizations sponsor many youth support and enrichment programs, the best of which spark motivations and interests in learning key content knowledge and build other college and career ready skills.

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make inroads into life after graduation and tap into their future interests. Efforts to promote a better grade-12-to-college transition should marshal new attention, resources, and partnerships that promote and co-validate applied and experiential learning outside of high school. This could include project-based learning that results in demonstrations of key college/career readiness and success skills, community service projects aligned with college-ready and college-level curricula, internships and apprenticeships in industry, and time spent as a student on a college campus.

GUIDANCE AND ADVISING IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ARE SPOTTY

All students, particularly first-generation college goers, need help navigating from high school to college, including the complexities of applying for financial aid and knowing when and how to seek academic or other support. This relates to the tenacity and college knowledge that many schools struggle to foster.

The fact that there are an average of about 470 public school students for each K-12 guidance counselor nationally is an indication of the challenge.¹¹ Further, it is untenable that a single staff position should bear responsibility for the development of key college and career ready skills, when it clearly needs to be a shared staff responsibility.

Another problem is that too many first-generation college-goers-to-be who are admitted to college as seniors never show up in the fall. This phenomenon is known as “summer melt,” caused by the need for coaching to navigate hurdles such as understanding financial aid or furnishing required forms—small hurdles for students with family who may have navigated through college themselves, but large ones for students without this support.¹² And too many students who make it to college drop out in their first year for a variety of academic and social reasons, or do not make curriculum choices that optimize their progression toward a degree or credential.

Supporting the development of key transition knowledge and skills needs to be intentionally co-designed, co-delivered, and co-validated in order to be more proactive and effective. For example:

- High schools and colleges could structure and staff summer guidance resources and strategies that decrease summer melt, including summer bridge programming.
- College success courses could be required in high school or the curriculum could be embedded throughout other courses for dual credit.

- Lessons from early-warning data system practices that have identified and reduced high school dropouts could be applied to grade 12 and the first year of college.
- Cohort structures that promote relationships with groups of entering college peers and a common set of college instructors and course requirements—a strategy employed by successful learning communities and programs¹³—could be made the norm.
- Instead of relying on students to initiate application and admissions processes, colleges could work with high schools to understand the profiles of 12th graders who tend to be successful and automatically admit them. The colleges then could inform the students early that there is a space waiting for them, and work with high schools to start processing the paperwork needed to enroll.

MOVING TOWARD A SHARED VISION

This series lays out a vision and a set of evidence-based strategies for redesigning grade 12 by tying it more tightly in purpose and practice to the first year of college for the ultimate goal of college and career success. Advancing any agenda, however right-minded and evidence-based it may be, must respect the delicate equilibrium that needs to be calibrated between top-down incentives—whether money, metrics, or policy—and support for local practice. Involving two historically separate systems, the redesign of the senior-to-freshman transition zone faces special challenges that leaders and policymakers must address.

Taking on any one of these challenges will require significant effort. But, in fact, they must all be addressed simultaneously in order to implement the ambitious agenda laid out here. That is, plans must target overall conditions, cultures, and routines in schools and on campuses so that they become the new normal. Even good policy becomes thwarted when practitioners do not understand its rationale, have insufficient time to “own” the change, or have insufficient capacity to respond positively to new pressures. On the flip side, policy incentives should be applied, even if judiciously. There are many innovative practices that exist as isolated exemplars and are sustained in spite of, rather than being supported and expanded by, policy.

The seasoned researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and influencers we consulted on the ideas in these papers advised that advocates combine a top-down policy approach with bottom-up, practitioner-driven efforts.

BUILD SHARED INTEREST AMONG K-12 AND POSTSECONDARY PRACTITIONERS

High school and college instructors and campus leaders understandably are focused on their own domains, each of which has its own distinct goals and culture. Asking staff from either institution to share responsibility for students' academic performance in the transition zone is to ask them to take on something they might not understand well. They need to become familiar with the cultural reality of the other and to structure their practices in order to acknowledge and accommodate the cultural reality of the other. The significance of this shift should not be underestimated. It is also important to mention collective bargaining units for K-12 and postsecondary staff that are inclined to tightly circumscribe roles and responsibilities for employees, making the suggestion of new roles harder to implement.

There are a few emerging state examples of K-12 accountability systems and higher education finance systems that incentivize each sector to collaborate with the other (e.g., granting higher ratings to districts that serve more dual enrollees). But these are relatively new and not widespread, nor do they necessarily promote the co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation sought here between high school and college partners.

Finally, secondary and postsecondary education data systems are rarely interoperable. Sometimes it is difficult to gain permission just to share data. Without the ability to connect data elements from the two systems, it is difficult to set, target, or monitor goals that would illustrate how students are making the senior-to-freshman leap and what might enable a smoother transition. When data-sharing agreements are in place, practitioners and policymakers still often need guidance from both systems about how to unpack analyses in order to act on the answers to important questions.

Develop incentives to embrace new cultural norms

The development of incentives to create new cultural norms is needed to change these realities. Metrics that epitomize the goals of co-design, co-

delivery, and co-validation should be elevated and held out as goals, even if no stakes are ultimately attached to them, in order to help create a shared vision and clear signals about priorities. For example, more students could be monitored and successfully supported by local high school and college partners with the goal of reducing summer melt rates. In states that reward colleges for helping more students to reach important success milestones, colleges could also count high school students whom they have reached early through dual enrollment or other co-delivered strategies that promote these same outcomes. This will require some data sharing and, ideally, shared data systems at the local or state level to enable partners and policymakers to understand progress toward such shared goals.

Create "safe spaces" to do co-design, co-delivery, co-validation

The creation of safe spaces for practitioners to do the co-design and co-delivery work that they and the state validate is essential. It is hard to imagine that any local co-validation or co-design work would start or proceed at any meaningful scale in the absence of the catalyst of state policy, incentives, or initiatives. At the same time, these stimuli can produce counterproductive responses, including fear of change, lack of understanding about intent, and lack of capacity to implement well. These may be heightened in attempts to encourage new behavior between systems. Thus, states should encourage joint planning by high school and college staff, permit latitude for partners attempting to innovate and use resources differently, and pledge safe harbors from unexpected outcomes.

Strike the right balance between state policy and local practice

At the same time, policy should try not to overdesign solutions. This can run counter to local adoption and ownership. A more appropriate state role, especially in this effort to work across systems, is to set standards for good work and promote thoughtful experimentation. For example, states should provide clarity about purposes and guiding principles, safe spaces for local innovation, signals about the change sought through data and metrics,

and tools, resources, and training that encourage and enable the examination of shared data to support continuous improvement and replication of successful work.

BUILD CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL FOR SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

In the rare circumstance where there is already the will among staff to work together in the transition zone, much less one where they are being nudged to see a shared interest, they need help in finding the best ways to be successful in such heady work. There are complicated technical issues to work out and new habits that must be built in co-designing, co-delivering, and co-validating students' trajectories across the K-12/postsecondary divide. These include a long list of issues: coordination of master scheduling, transportation, teacher credentialing requirements, student support resources and strategies, and alignment of standards, curricula, and syllabi. Staff generally do not have the training, time, or support they need to work across the high school-college divide.

Build practitioner capacity to share responsibility

It is critical to focus on building human capital and staff capacity in the transition zone. The vision advanced here ultimately will be institutionalized only if people's roles and responsibilities are reshaped and supported to operate in this new realm of shared responsibility. One example would be to create teacher and school staff training and certification routes to build a new "transition zone" corps equipped to help students make the leap from grade 12 through the first year of college and beyond. Incentives could be created for teachers who get credentials qualifying them to teach courses for dual credit or who gain important knowledge about careers through externships in

local industry. High school and college guidance counselors could be trained to become more like managers,

and less like sole-service providers, of the "college knowledge" curriculum and how it's delivered school and campus wide. Schools and colleges need access to adaptable models, tools, templates, and processes that others have used to successfully share students in order to speed progress and prevent falling back into inertia.

Build leadership capacity to share responsibility

It is also crucial to support the capacity for change management locally by working with institutional leaders. One aim would be to help local leaders promote understanding of the rationale for reform with their own key constituencies, including teachers, students, and parents. Examples of success must be made visible and celebrated. Leaders can educate others about the safe spaces that local and state policymakers have created, dispel myths about misperceived barriers to innovation, and cite the evidence base justifying the need for new approaches. The purpose and intent of changes must continually be messaged and endorsed by influential members of the community, including political and industry leaders who speak to the importance of a better-prepared workforce. Also, leaders must share lessons with each other about how to recognize opportunities to further embed and institutionalize changes when a critical mass of students start to flow differently between high school and college, necessitating new procedures, processes, and structures that can bring grade 12 and postsecondary continually closer.

The vision advanced here ultimately will be institutionalized only if people's roles and responsibilities are reshaped and supported to operate in this new realm of shared responsibility.

CONCLUSION

In an economic era that increasingly rewards workers who have postsecondary credentials, high school must be more effectively designed to give all students a firm footing in college and career. There is no more obvious place to start than the redesign of 12th grade, building on states' widespread implementation of college- and career-ready standards and assessments that culminate in grade 11.

In many respects, the senior year can be an early proving ground for how to leverage a new infrastructure to ensure more students are prepared not just to start college or a career, but to succeed in both. Doing so will require more systemic secondary-postsecondary partnerships, grounded in shared responsibility, to create and support new ways to set students, regardless of skill level at the beginning of 12th grade, on tailored trajectories toward key, common milestones of credential attainment. This, in turn, will require attention to building new capacities and cultures, validating new learner experiences, responding collaboratively to data that spur innovation, and developing policy incentives that nudge without creating new problems out of undue pressure.

There are opportunities and risks associated with this endeavor that it would be wise to consider in moving forward. Opportunities include new interest, research, and advances in new competency-based education in K-12 and higher education. High school and college partners ought to leverage competency-based approaches, in which students are supported to demonstrate mastery and move onto higher-level work at their own pace, for their applicability in co-designing new trajectories in the transition zone.¹⁴ Discoveries in brain science and cognitive development are leading to new tools and strategies for engaging and *accelerating* the learning of a wider range of

The goal is for 12th grade not to demarcate the end of education for any student but to segue every student into a rewarding next step into the future.

students, especially those typically underserved and underrepresented in college, such as low-income youth.¹⁵

Among the risks, a primary challenge is determining how to design trajectories and supports that address the needs of the wide-ranging group of 12th grade learners. One related risk is to avoid establishing classifications systems of proficiency that tend to disadvantage, misclassify, and unduly undercut the potential of low-income youth, students of color, and other underserved youth. The state of assessment currently is not yet up to the task of characterizing in any actionable way the multifaceted dimensions of students' readiness for college and career. Until a time when that ever becomes more precise, strict cut scores on any single assessment system ought to be avoided in favor of multiple indicators. Trajectories also ought to be designed to be flexible, allowing students to accelerate and maximize learning opportunities toward college credentials based on performance instead of confining them to any sort of inflexible track.

Finally, it will be important to pay special attention to developing strategies for students who enter 12th grade far behind. They will tend to be students who are in the most challenged schools and districts with concentrated poverty and the least-prepared and least-supported teachers. Any new initiative will understandably start with strategies to gain quick wins and build momentum—for example, identifying those for whom modest intervention is most likely to mean the difference between a positive and a negative outcome. But if this success comes at the expense of ignoring how to support the hardest to serve, it can only go so far to address educational inequities and could inadvertently exacerbate them. No matter where high schools and colleges choose to start making headway on new designs for the transition zone, it is critical to support research and development and include incentives for adopting innovations for students who are far from proficiency. The goal is for 12th grade not to demarcate the end of education for any student but to segue every student into a rewarding next step into the future.

APPENDIX

Over several months in 2014-15, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jobs for the Future convened groups of K-12 and postsecondary innovators and researchers to generate new strategies to strengthen what schools and colleges can do to put more 12th graders on a path to college and career success. This series reflects the collective wisdom of these groups. JFF is grateful for their participation and contributions in informing this paper and the entire series. We do not claim to be advancing a consensus view, but rather used their advice to shape and sharpen our own.

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Niketa Brar	Advance Illinois
Sue Cain	Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education
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Ann Coles	uAspire
Linda Collins	Career Ladders Project
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Deborah Santiago	Excelencia in Education
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John Squires	Southern Regional Education Board
Lindsey Tepe	New America
Andrea Venezia	Education Insights Center
April Yee	The James Irvine Foundation
Jennifer Zinth	Education Commission of the States

ENDNOTES

¹ Each state chooses the standards it will use, as well as assessments aligned to those standards to measure student performance. For a state-by-state map, see <http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-the-national-k-12-testing-landscape.html>

² The ACT is taken largely voluntarily, except in a handful of states that mandate it.

³ It is worth noting here that this milestone was a subject of ongoing debate during our consultation with authors and education leaders. Some wondered if was sufficiently ambitious—both for students and for incenting the increased shared responsibility by high schools and colleges sought here. Alternative recommendations, for example, included pushing toward the completion of two, not just one, gateway courses or accelerating the completion of the gateway course(s) as the milestone for the end of senior year.

We stick with the first year of college as an initial milestone marker because of the wide range of levels of readiness with which 12th graders will be starting, and the substantial pressures of change that even this goal will present to high schools and colleges. For example, this should provide a stretch goal for high schools and colleges to design solutions for students who enter 12th grade very far from academic proficiency (e.g., several grade levels below in reading) without providing an inadvertent incentive to ignore these underrepresented students for fear of underperforming against a higher bar.

⁴ Complete College America. 2012. *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*. Available at <http://completecollege.org/docs/CCA-Remediation-final.pdf>

⁵ Hughes, Katherine, Olga Rodriguez, Linsey Edwards, & Clive Belfield. 2012. *Broadening the Benefits of Dual Enrollment: Reaching Under Achieving and Underrepresented Students with Career-Focused Programs*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center for the James Irvine Foundation.

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⁶ One example is California's Early Assessment Program in English. For information, see <https://www.calstate.edu/eap/index.shtml>

⁷ Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, Stanford University; & University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. 2014. *Beyond College Eligibility: A New Framework for Promoting College Readiness. College Readiness Indicator Systems Resource Series*. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

⁸ Complete College America. 2015. *Best Practices: Co-Requisite Remediation*. Available at: <http://completecollege.org/strategies/#stratHolderCoreqRemediation>

⁹ Jobs for the Future. 2015. Students at the Center Hub. Available at: <http://studentsatthecenterhub.org>

¹⁰ Linked Learning students are showing more engagement and success in their college-preparatory coursework, completion of high school, and understanding of steps needed to advance in careers. The approach is one of a range of pathways connecting K-12, postsecondary, and work-based learning being promoted by the Pathways to Prosperity Network, a partnership between JFF and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the state of California's Career Pathways Trust initiative. http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/linked_learning

Guha, Roneeta, et al. 2014. *Taking Stock of the California Linked Learning District Initiative. Fifth-year Evaluation Report*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. <http://www.jff.org/blog/2015/05/29/california-career-pathways-trust-making-waves>

¹¹ American Counseling Association. 2013. *Counselor to Student Ratio Chart*. Available at: <http://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/public-policy-faqs-and-documents/2013-counselor-to-student-ratio-chart.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

¹² Castleman, Benjamin & Lindsay Page. 2014. *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students Through the Transition to College*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

¹³ The Posse Foundation is one example. See: <https://www.possefoundation.org>

¹⁴ Le, Cecilia, Rebecca Wolfe, & Adria Steinberg. 2014. *The Past and the Promise: Today's Competency Education Movement*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. Available at: <http://www.jff.org/publications/past-and-promise-todays-competency-education-movement>

¹⁵ See the online Hub of research and resources at JFF's *Students at the Center: Teaching and Learning in the Era of the Common Core*. Available at: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org>



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