



WHY 12TH GRADE MUST BE REDESIGNED NOW—AND HOW

BY JOEL VARGAS

Many young people experience frustration and failure as they enter postsecondary education. Just a few months after earning a high school diploma, they are ill equipped to handle the demands of college. Today's focus on college and career readiness for all heightens concerns about the preparation students receive in 12th grade, especially to help low-income and first-generation college students. These young people typically attend less rigorous schools and have fewer social networks and experiences that can help smooth a transition to college or career.

Both high schools and colleges have an interest in making sure students leave high school prepared to succeed in college and beyond. Yet there are few, if any, incentives for secondary and postsecondary institutions to work together to promote student success during this critical period.

This paper is the first in a series proposing a redesign of the transition from high school to college, focusing on grade 12 and the first year of college. **Our vision is of a shared transition zone where secondary and postsecondary systems take joint responsibility for student readiness and collaborate in key ways to increase student success.**

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. Entering 12th graders exhibit a wide range of levels of readiness, so high schools and colleges need to develop a variety of structures and strategies to support students.

Achieving this ambitious goal requires a clear interim objective to serve as a benchmark of progress. **We propose this key marker: whether students have completed, by the end of their**

first year of college, at least one credit-bearing, college-level introductory course in English or math. Today, too many students, especially underserved youth, are unable to reach this milestone because they are floundering in remedial courses in their first year of college. But achieving this goal—and moving past it, for those who achieve it early—would demonstrate that students are prepared for college-level work and build momentum toward completing a credential, which so many fail to do now.

STARTING WITH PROMISING PRACTICES

What strategies would propel all students toward completion of one college-level, credit-bearing course by the end of their first year of postsecondary education? The paper describes practices that have evidence of preparing youth for college and career in order to provide educators and policymakers with some direction.

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.

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.

STUDENTS “READY” BY 12TH GRADE WOULD BENEFIT FROM

Dual Enrollment: taking and completing gateway college courses while still in high school through “dual credit,” in which the high school and college both grant credit for successful course completion.

Progression in a Program of Study: completing a gateway credit-bearing college course before second semester of senior year, and beginning a program of study toward an Associate’s degree or other credential.

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

Transition Courses: taking transition courses in 12th grade so they are prepared for credit-bearing college coursework in math or English by the end of high school.

Accelerated Developmental Education: entering an accelerated developmental education route that targets key gaps in skills and knowledge to speed progression into credit-bearing college coursework.

Dual Enrollment with Co-Requisite Course for Academic Support: receiving academic support for gateway courses through simultaneous enrollment in a co-requisite course that could include supplemental instruction, tutoring, and peer-learning groups.

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

College Success Course: taking a college success course that coaches them in the habits and routines of successful college students.

Community Service and Internships: harnessing the power of learning experiences outside of school walls, including community service, industry internships, school-based business enterprises, and capstone projects.

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS

Any shared effort by K-12 and postsecondary systems to redesign the transition from 12th grade to college must address larger systemic issues that have interfered with past attempts to address these problems.

ACCESS IS BASED ON NARROW BANDS OF SKILL

College and career readiness encompasses more than academic knowledge and skills. 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 (key academic content knowledge and cognitive strategies needed to

succeed in college-level work), academic tenacity (the underlying beliefs and attitudes that drive student achievement), and college knowledge (the knowledge base and contextual skills that enable students to successfully access and navigate college). The design of paths through the transition should include access to experiences and supports for students based on multiple indicators of their postsecondary readiness, and should build their readiness in multiple domains.

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

Both secondary and postsecondary schools and systems tend toward slower, lower-level options for underprepared students. But while there are definitely humane motivations for not wanting to put unprepared students in over their heads, the current context enables the natural tendencies of many young people to obligingly take educational paths of lower rigor unless they are otherwise pushed. Many more could tackle rigorous courses and succeed with the right supports, and emerging models show acceleration is more effective than remediation. 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.

SCHOOLING IS TYPICALLY CONFINED TO CLASSROOMS

By and large, schools still largely hold the monopoly on learning time in our country. But new research shows that relevant real-world learning experiences motivate students, and result in more meaningful learning and stronger skills. Efforts to promote a better grade-12-to-college transition should marshal new attention, resources, and partnerships to promote and co-validate applied and experiential learning outside of high school.

GUIDANCE AND ADVISING IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ARE SPOTTY

All students, particularly first-generation college goers, need help in navigating the transition from high school to college, including the complexities of applying for financial aid and seeking academic and other supports. High schools and colleges

need to work together to support the development of key transition knowledge and skills through requiring college success courses in high school, creating summer bridge programming, sharing data, developing cohort structures, and enrolling students in colleges where they will be successful.

MOVING TOWARD A SHARED VISION

The redesign of the senior-to-freshman transition zone, which involves two historically separate systems, faces special challenges that leaders and policymakers must address simultaneously. Plans must target overall conditions, cultures, and routines in schools and on campuses so that they become the new normal. Advocates should 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 are understandably focused on their own domains, each of which has its own distinct goals and culture. Each needs to become familiar with the other's cultural realities and to structure practices in order to acknowledge and accommodate those realities. This will require the development of incentives to create new cultural norms, the creation of safe spaces for practitioners to do co-design and co-delivery work, and a purposeful balance between state policies and local practices.

BUILD CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL FOR SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

Once high school and college staff are willing to work together, they need help finding the best ways to be successful. Building human capital and staff capacity in the transition zone will be critical. The vision advanced here will ultimately be institutionalized only if people's roles and responsibilities are reshaped and they are supported to operate in this new realm of shared responsibility. It is also crucial to support local institutional leaders, who can support and message the purpose and intent of changes aimed at bringing grade 12 and postsecondary continually closer.

CONCLUSION

In an economic era that increasingly requires workers to have a postsecondary credential, 12th grade must be more effectively designed to give all students a firm footing in college and career. It is critical to develop strategies for students who enter 12th grade far behind. 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.

For more information about JFF services to build educational pathways that prepare all young people for college and careers, contact Joel Vargas, Vice President, School and Learning Designs, jvargas@jff.org.



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