



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION: IMPROVING COLLEGE READINESS AS A STRATEGY TOWARD COLLEGE COMPLETION

Since President Obama's 2009 challenge to "Once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world," American colleges have been challenged to turn college *access* into college *completion*. Enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions is on the increase, with extraordinary numbers of entering students in need of remedial work but few being successful in remedial programs. We all have heard painful statistics about the percentage of these students who enter higher education unprepared for college-level work and who generally do not achieve their postsecondary goals.

Recent data at our own institution reveal that 71% of all new students require at least one remedial course. Thirty percent of our direct-from-high-school students are college ready in all areas (reading, writing, and mathematics). Once enrolled, only 59% of them are successful in developmental courses—compared to an aggregate success rate of 73% in college-level courses. Needing a certain amount of review is understandable for returning adults. But the percentages and sheer numbers of students who graduate from high school and enter college needing developmental/remedial courses are frustrating. College and career readiness of high school graduates has never been more important to achieving college success.

In 2006, our college and the four public school districts in our service region forged a partnership, the *Alliance for College Readiness*. The goal was to reduce the number of high school graduates needing developmental coursework upon enrollment in college (no matter where they enroll). Six years later, we are still working on that goal; and our college readiness rates are trending up while we continue to develop a systemic approach to college readiness.

As the Alliance partnership has evolved, we have come to understand that on-going communication commands an integral role in this systematic approach. Members of the Alliance include faculty and administration from 17 middle schools, 11 high schools, and our college. These diverse partners interact three times each year at large-group meetings and monthly throughout the school year in content-specific teams. Each team is co-chaired by high school and college members who lead the meetings and work with Alliance leadership to maintain the focus on annual goals. In addition to the teams, high-level administrators from the college and each high school district meet regularly to support and guide the teams' progress.

The teams' efforts have increased instructional alignment and understanding between high school and college faculty and staff, and more recently between those two levels and middle school faculty and staff. Simply by sharing and discussing their own pedagogy and teaching decisions, the curriculum that guides them, and the challenges their students experience, these Alliance members have found common ground and areas of disconnect. Building on those areas of commonality and seeking to connect the disconnected have led to meaningful interventions for students as well as professional development for faculty/staff—which not only keeps members coming back for more but increases the knowledge from which the Alliance continues to share and grow.

Through the large-group meetings, the Alliance connects the individual teams to our regional goal of increasing college readiness and to state and national initiatives and policy shifts. Alliance members report that they feel more connected and informed both locally and nationally because the Alliance communication includes the classroom teacher, the building administrator, and the district-level administrator. And the Alliance gives participants a forum from which to voice their needs and concerns. The Alliance acknowledges that being college ready requires that students not only have content knowledge and cognitive skills, but that they also have the behavioral traits that predict college success and sufficient knowledge to negotiate often-confusing college logistics.



One particular project that has evolved from our Alliance teams is a summer bridge program for students who just miss placing into college-level courses in writing and mathematics. The Alliance for College Readiness Summer Bridge seeks to address these objectives:

- increase student placement into college level coursework,
- improve communication of college-level expectations through collaborative teaching, and
- facilitate development of innovative teaching practices.

Based on their developmental needs, students are placed into a writing review course or a math review course. During a three-week boot-camp experience, students receive intensive, focused instruction in math or writing, along with content reading instruction. New in 2011, Summer Bridge included recent high school graduates and returning adults; and “Option B” classes were provided for students who placed into either writing or math in the middle-level developmental course.

Upon completing the Summer Bridge program, students retake the college placement tests; in four years, of the 111 students completing the program, 73% have earned scores that allow them to enroll in a higher-level course than would have been advised initially. For example, a student advised to enroll in a developmental course may now enroll in a college-level course, or a student advised initially to enroll in the first of two courses in developmental math has proceeded directly into college algebra, increasing his placement by more than one level.

While individual student success drives the Summer Bridge faculty, their professional development more broadly addresses the Alliance for College Readiness goal. Teams of high school and college faculty develop and review the Bridge curriculum, and similar teams implement and revise the curriculum each summer. In the process, these faculty members share their best strategies and materials, and observe each other in action. Typically, solitary teaching tasks—including lesson planning, student assessment, and problem solving, as well as actual classroom teaching—become group processes; and students and teachers benefit. College and high school faculty report that the group teaching process allows them to step back and see their own “tried and true” methods differently as they observe their team members in action. Math and writing faculty who have experienced students’ poor reading behaviors in their own classrooms accumulate content reading tips as the reading faculty guide students to integrate reading strategies into their writing and math processes. Faculty

members say that the Summer Bridge provides some of the best learning experiences of their professional lives.

Of course, this intense professional development is not left at the classroom door at the end of the summer. As Bridge faculty return to their school year positions, they do so armed with greater appreciation of their high school and college colleagues, greater understanding of high school and college curriculum, and a stronger sense of how they can connect the two levels in their own classrooms. They better appreciate the continuum of learning and their roles within that continuum. Ultimately, the beneficiaries of this professional development are not only the students in Summer Bridge but also the hundreds of students in Bridge faculty members’ classrooms in succeeding years.

The Alliance Summer Bridge program is only one of several projects that have emerged from our college readiness partnership. The teams have created college readiness professional development for their peers and designed college readiness materials for students and parents that have been distributed throughout our service region. Through the Alliance partnership, the College is able to provide each of our “feeder high schools” with college readiness data, based on the students’ high school course-taking patterns. These data have begun to influence high school curriculum and course-taking patterns.

As Grandma always said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” We believe her wisdom provides an equally appropriate adage for improving college readiness. The projects of the Alliance for College Readiness, from data-sharing, to on-going communication, to Summer Bridge, all aim to help students avoid remedial or developmental education placement and increase college completion rates.

**Alison Douglas**, *Professor, English, and Director, Alliance for College Readiness*

**Julie Schaid**, *Associate Dean, College Readiness and School Partnerships*

For further information, contact the authors at Elgin Community College, 1700 Spartan Drive, Elgin, IL 60119. Email: jschaid@elgin.edu