

AYPF Forum Brief

Examining the Role of Summer Bridge Programs in Promoting College Readiness and Completion: Lessons Learned from Texas' Developmental Summer Bridges

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Overview

As colleges and universities across the nation strive to improve college completion rates, they have identified the growing numbers of students requiring developmental education courses as an obstacle. Developmental courses, designed to remedy academic deficiencies, delay students' entry into credit-bearing classes. Nationwide, about 40% of college-age students and nearly 60% of community college students take at least one developmental education course at the start of their college careers. However, research suggests that less than one-half of students who are referred to developmental education succeed in completing their recommended sequence of courses.

Summer bridge programs, designed to provide graduating high school seniors with the academic and college-readiness skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education, have emerged as a promising intervention. Typically running four-to-six weeks during the summer months, summer bridge programs offer an integrated approach with intensive coursework that may be accompanied by tutoring, additional labs, stipends, and student support services designed to facilitate students' transition to college and help them prepare for credit-bearing courses in their first semester of college.

This forum described the creation and evaluation of Texas' developmental summer bridge programs for students in need of remediation. Developed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the developmental summer bridge model has been funded by the state's legislature since 2007. The National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR),¹ in cooperation with the THECB, has undertaken a large-scale, multi-year evaluation of eight Texas summer bridge sites, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences and Houston Endowment.

Presentations

Katherine Hughes, Assistant Director for Work and Education Reform Research at the Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, began the discussion by framing this work as an example of state policymakers, postsecondary institutions and practitioners, and researchers coming together to identify problems, implement solutions, and evaluate interventions. Hughes set the context for the problem by citing comparative state

¹ NCPR is a partnership of the Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University; MDRC; the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia; and faculty at Harvard University.

statistics for the number of students not completing high school on time; the number of young adults who enroll in college; and the percentage who go on to earn a postsecondary credential. She noted that the risk factors associated with college non-completion begin in high school, where only about 60 percent of students graduate within four years. Moreover, Hughes explained that high school graduation standards are not well-aligned with college expectations, resulting in large numbers of new college students not being adequately prepared, and thus being placed in developmental education. She noted that these challenges are not unique to Texas but instead reflect a problem nationwide. “We need bridges. We need lots of different approaches to solve this problem,” Hughes said.

Hughes presented a variety of interventions designed to promote college readiness including: (1) offering college remedial courses at high schools; (2) dual enrollment programs, which allow high school students to take college courses for credit; (3) early assessment programs that indicate to students in high school that they could be in need of remediation at the postsecondary level and (4) summer bridge programs. Hughes described the summer bridge programs as adopting an integrated approach to helping students adjust to college academically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Describing the THECB’s efforts in Texas as a “work in progress,” **David Gardner, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Planning and Policy and Chief Academic Officer, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board**, continued the discussion by describing the varied state-level efforts to improve college completion in Texas. He explained that while the state has increased its annual production of degrees, too many students are still leaving the higher education system without a degree—and at a high cost to taxpayers. Between 2003 and 2009, 66% of Texas students who entered higher education did not graduate, amounting to a loss of \$713.2 million in financial aid. Gardner added that students who leave higher education without a credential most often have student loan debt to repay, a fact that is often neglected in policy discussions. Multiplied over several years, “an immense amount of money has been invested in students to attend institutions of higher education with little to show for it,” he explained.

In 2000, the THECB along with the Texas Department of Education developed a plan, *Closing the Gaps by 2015*, to improve college attainment, which includes college and career readiness standards; end-of-course exams; and a college preparatory curriculum for all students. As Gardner described the curriculum, which is now completed by about 80% of all Texas high school students and is required for admission to any one of Texas’ 35 state universities, “you don’t have to fight to get in; you have to fight to get out.”

Gardner emphasized the importance of keeping college students on track to graduate on time, citing statistics that show that students are less likely to complete their credential beyond the six-year mark. A key component of such efforts, he noted, is minimizing the number of students who must take developmental education, since the odds are against these students graduating. He said that colleges and universities lose about 50% of students during their first and second years, and

that those who are not prepared for postsecondary work are less likely to return for their second year. He pointed to data from Texas showing that nearly 80% of students who had met the state's readiness standards did persist after their first year, compared to about one-half of students who required developmental education. Noting that Texas "does not have an absolute answer at this point, but is moving in the right direction," Gardner said that "the bottom line is that the vast majority of students who enter developmental education never graduate."

Gardner described three types of initiatives in Texas designed to promote college readiness: (1) College Connections, a Texas program aimed at helping high school students apply for college; (2) programs designed to strengthen the P-16 infrastructure by working with school districts and assigning advisors to assist students on college campuses; and (3) bridging programs that serve high school, developmental, or adult education students. He emphasized that all programs need to target the basic needs of any population, both cultural and academic. Moreover, partnerships with high schools are critical for facilitating student enrollment in all of these programs. Both instructional and student support staff must be involved in designing, planning, and implementing programs and empowered to assess progress and make adjustments as needed, he explained.

Gardner described the next steps for federal and state governments to consider as they move forward in promoting college readiness and completion. Specifically, he recommended:

- Funding developmental education demonstration projects;
- Expanding access to PATHWAY vertical faculty teams in which teachers use data to identify trends in student achievement to best target resources;
- Funding adult basic education projects modeled on best practices;
- Working with college deans and schools of education to ensure that professors and administrators are aware of college readiness standards; and
- Piloting AVID, a middle and high school program designed to make students eligible for a four-year college, on a demonstration basis at colleges and universities.

He concluded by noting Texas' goal had both short-term and long-term dimensions. "It's not just about getting these students through college. It's not just about the success of these students. It's also about their children. If we can get the current adult population through college, they will be in a better place to help their own children," Gardner explained.

Evan Weissman, Operations Associate, MDRC, discussed preliminary findings from NCPR's Texas Developmental Summer Bridge Study. The eight programs included in the study had several common features, including:

- Four-to-five-week summer sessions;

- Accelerated instruction in developmental math, English, and/or reading;
- Small cohorts of students to facilitate bonding among students and between students and instructors;
- Academic and student services support;
- “College knowledge” components; and
- Student stipends of up to \$400 for those who completed the program.

Although the programs varied in their implementation, Weissman noted that all of the eight programs had the core components in place and were therefore fair tests of the summer bridge model. The programs served a majority Hispanic, female, and economically disadvantaged student population whose interest in participating in the program ranged from wanting to get their remedial courses out of the way to wanting to see if they were ready for college.

Weissman stated that the goals of the Texas study are: (1) to document the implementation of the programs, including the most challenging and promising aspects; and (2) to gauge the effectiveness of the summer bridge programs in terms of whether they reduce the need for developmental education and improve college outcomes. Through the use of a random assignment design, the study team was able to determine whether the college outcomes of summer bridge program participants were better than those of a group of similar students who did not participate in the program. Early findings from the research suggest that the summer bridge programs did not have an impact on college enrollment rates or persistence. However, the research points to a shift in the average courseload taken by students who completed the programs, with students taking fewer developmental education credits and more college-level credits. In addition, students enrolled in summer bridge programs were more likely to meet state standards in reading, writing, and math. Although the effects were not large, the results are statistically significant. Weissman noted that the summer bridge programs seemed to “give students a leg up.”

With an interim report scheduled for 2011 and the final report scheduled for early 2012, Weissman discussed the implications of the preliminary findings. He said that even short programs like these summer bridges show promise for reducing students’ need for developmental courses, and that larger gains may be produced by targeting rising seniors, continuing support throughout the school year, and incorporating additional financial incentives for students. Emphasizing that high school completion standards are not the same as college entrance standards, Weissman concluded his presentation by noting that better alignment between high school and college is critical to students’ success. “If we want seamless pipeline of students between high school and college, we need seamless policies and programs bridging high school and college as well,” he said.

Luzelma Canales, Interim Associate Dean of Community Engagement & Workforce Development, South Texas College, one of the summer bridge program sites included in the NCPR study, described her experiences as an administrator of the college, which serves a fast-growing Hispanic population that is largely poor and uneducated. In fact, student enrollment at South Texas College has grown from just over 1,000 students in 1993 to nearly 30,000 students in 2010. Of graduates, 57% took remedial courses.

To continue on the alignment theme, Canales suggested that dual enrollment was a workable solution for reducing the need for remedial classes. She said that over 9,000 high school students in the McAllen, Texas, area were participating in such programs. She credited dual enrollment for increasing the percentages of students who were college ready in English/language arts and mathematics. The percentage of high school graduates who were college ready upon enrollment at South Texas College increased from 10% in 2005 to 39% in 2008. “Things are getting better,” she said. “Is it huge? No, but we’re moving in the right direction. Is it where we want to be? Absolutely not. We need to dig even further into the data. But dual enrollment is a great way to leverage the resources we have available to us.”

Regarding the summer bridge program at South Texas College, Canales explained that her school asks instructors to weave student support services into their classes to help students understand the connection between managing their schoolwork and fulfilling their other responsibilities. According to Canales, “We have to make sure that student support services are coordinated. Faculty must be open to having a counselor come in to talk with students. Our students are busy people. They have lives. They work. The bottom line is that our students don’t have the luxury to do hours and hours of homework. How do we as colleges help students balance their cultural and familial responsibilities with their academic commitments?”

In addition, Canales said that it’s often difficult to implement programs or program components that might be proven in research to be effective, but are not feasible for community college students. For example, they know that programs that rely on intensive, on-task work for four to five hours per day better prepare students for college. However, she noted that it is often difficult for community college students to organize their schedules in this way. “Reality may not always be aligned with what the research says,” she explained.

At the conclusion of the presentation, the AYPF moderator summarized the consistent themes heard throughout. They included:

- Continue to fund research to determine best practices;
- Allow program parameters to be flexible enough to make changes based upon what we learn from the research;
- Break down the silos among research, policy, and practice so that the lessons learned from each can inform all decisions;

- Link accountability to improvement based upon analysis of the data; and
- Provide additional flexibility within funding so that programs can use the dollars where they are needed most (e.g, to fund professional development to learn research-supported best practices).

Question & Answer Period

Forum attendees had an opportunity to ask the presenters a few questions. The first concerned the role of the federal government in crafting and supporting a comprehensive approach to college completion. Suggesting that the federal government mirror policy interventions that have taken place on the state level, Gardner noted that Texas is a data-driven state that has made periodic adjustments when necessary. “You have to be willing to make changes along the way. We look across projects to identify key components and key values. Then we ask, ‘Is this something we can adapt to other environments?’”

Canales underscored the importance of flexibility when it comes to program implementation and funding. She explained that administrators and practitioners need to make changes when things are not working well. “It’s okay to take a little left turn when we’re supposed to be going right. It doesn’t make sense to continue with something that’s not working.” Canales said.

Noting that students tend to be more successful if they feel a part of a community, another participant questioned if the NCPR research study tracked the number of first-generation American students enrolled in the summer bridge programs or the distance students traveled to campus. Weissman responded by noting that while the study did not collect these data, the summer bridge programs were typically aware of students’ situations, and placed a great deal of emphasis on community building by organizing students into smaller cohorts and employing peer mentors and tutors. Canales concurred, explaining that the summer bridge programs connected students to the campus’ learning center, labs, and tutoring services.

Gardner added that in Texas, private colleges and universities are better able than public ones to connect students to faculty and their community. For example, a college in Houston that has a large commuter population enjoyed improved graduation rates after organizing students by neighborhood to facilitate carpools and such. “We don’t do this systematically at our public institutions. And it’s more of a challenge at community colleges, because of their transient population,” he said.

The final question of the forum concerned the integration of social-emotional skills in subject matter during summer bridge programs. Noting that colleges are limited in what they can accomplish in four- to five-week summer programs, Canales said that South Texas College incorporated these skills into math courses. She also added that her school is an “emotional intelligence campus,” where faculty and administrators—the most critical influences on persistence—seek to minimize students’ barriers to college completion.

