

## Preparing High School Students for College: An Exploratory Study of College Readiness Partnership Programs in Texas

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Nationwide, about 40 percent of college students take at least one remedial course to prepare for college-level coursework (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). One cause of this high rate of remedial enrollment is the misalignment of high school graduation standards and college academic expectations (Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). College readiness partnership programs attempt to address this problem by facilitating students' transition to college.

The current study examines 37 state and local college readiness partnership programs in Texas

as well as the partnerships that created these programs. The findings are based on a review of the relevant research and Texas policy literature, analysis of an online scan of college readiness partnership programs in Texas with a web presence, and site visits to high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations in the Houston and Dallas–Fort Worth areas. We define college readiness partnership programs as programmatic interventions co-sponsored by secondary and postsecondary institutions and offered to high school students with the goal of increasing students' college readiness.

## College Readiness Partnership Programs

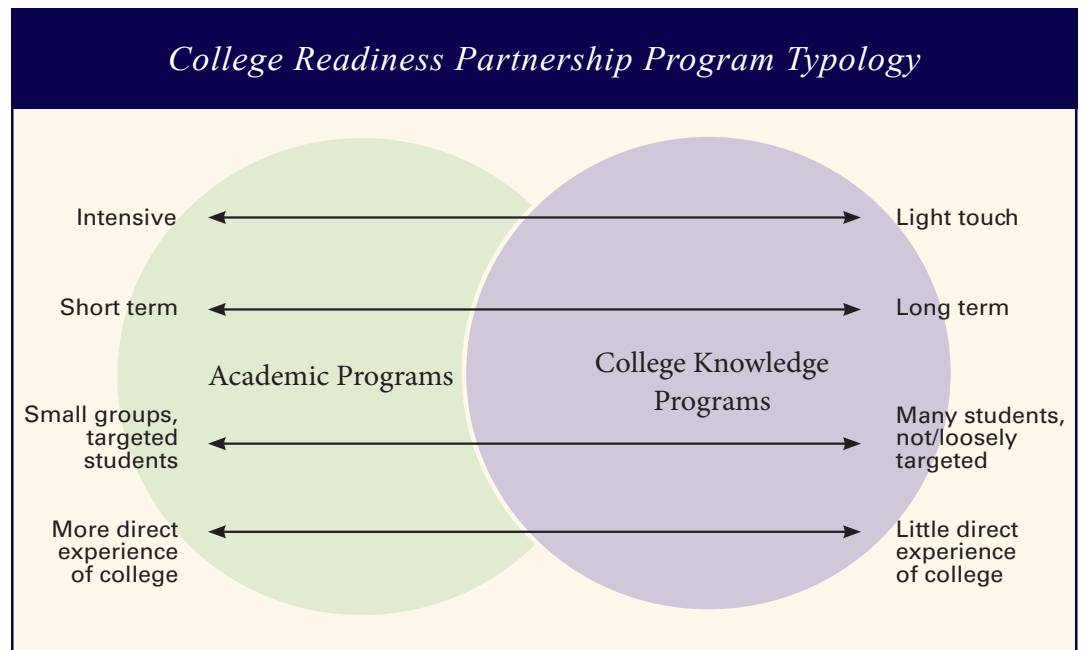
The research literature suggests that pre-college interventions may promote college readiness and reduce students' need for remediation by addressing academic and skill deficits (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003; Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997; Gándara, 2001; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna, Fenske, & Swail, 2000). However, there have been few rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of college readiness programs in general, and there is very little literature on college readiness *partnership* programs in particular.

In the current study, we identified characteristics of college readiness partnership programs in Texas using data from an online scan. Of the 133 programs we found, federally funded programs accounted for 72 percent, state programs for 16 percent, and locally developed and funded programs for 12 percent. Because federally funded programs follow a fairly uniform model and are already well described, we focused on state and local program models. We identified 37 state and local programs in the online scan, and we observed a range of programs during our site visits. All programs were offered through a partnership between a high school and a college.

College readiness partnership programs could often be classified as *academic-focused* or *college knowledge-focused*. Those that focused primarily on academic subjects (most often reading, writing, and mathematics) generally served small groups of students who were at risk of placing into developmental education in college. While their primary goal was to provide academic content, many also included instruction on college

knowledge, and some focused on strengthening academic skills, such as study skills and time management. Academic-focused programs were generally intense, relatively short, and likely to offer a direct experience with college; students in many of these programs spent time on college campuses.

College knowledge-focused programs were generally less intensive, more sustained, and more likely to be offered during the academic year. They focused on informing students and their parents about college planning, applying to college, financial aid, and navigating college life. These programs tended to be integrated into regular high school programming and were often available to all students in a specific grade level or school population. Compared with academic-focused programs, college knowledge-focused programs were more likely to offer indirect experiences of college by helping students to navigate the admissions process, complete financial aid paperwork, and possibly take a campus tour.



The figure above illustrates the program typology that we observed. While programs often included a blend of features, there was a tendency for academic-focused programs to include the features found on the left side and for college knowledge-focused programs to include those on the right.

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## College Readiness Partnerships

The most common partnerships we observed were between school districts and postsecondary institutions, followed by those involving multiple partners in a region. We examined how partners engage with one another to assist high school students to enter college prepared to take college-level courses.

### *Key Characteristics*

The partnerships we observed varied in intensity. Some involved *coordination*, or networking and sharing of information, and others involved *collaboration*, with joint planning and power sharing.

Program observations and interviews conducted during our site visits suggest that college readiness partnerships require institutional commitment for strong program implementation. For example, having dedicated staff who manage programs and have a presence in the high schools appears to be important. Many partnerships were sustained by individuals who had a deep interest in their success and were considered by others as their champions. Both funding and policy mandates clearly influenced the intensity and focus of the partnerships we visited. While those we interviewed mentioned many reasons to work together, policy changes and funding availability influenced the extent to which collaboration occurred.

### *Potential Benefits*

Depending on a range of contextual factors, college readiness partnerships may be associated with a number of benefits. Institutions that share information and resources may be able to optimize their efforts to improve student outcomes, share best practices, and create opportunities for cross-system faculty development. Colleges may also benefit from the opportunities for student recruitment created by college readiness partnership programs. Collaboration between high schools and colleges may improve the alignment of their academic standards and assessment, reducing the gap between high school graduation requirements and college expectations. In some cases, collaboration also leads to additional ongoing, mutually beneficial initiatives and actions.

## *Barriers and Challenges*

Certain conditions make it difficult to develop college readiness partnership programs. There is often a lack of funding available for new interventions or for collaborative efforts between colleges and high schools. Colleges and K-12 systems may also experience difficulty communicating with each other as a result of differences in their cultural norms and priorities. Finally, the complex patterns of student progression that occur when students from a given high school go to multiple colleges and universities can make it difficult to customize programs to prepare students for college.

## Implications and Reflections

Although few rigorous evaluations of college readiness partnership programs have been conducted, the literature and our findings generally support their potential to improve college readiness for students in the “academic middle,” who are likely to graduate high school intending to go to college but are at risk of being placed in developmental education courses. Strong, collaborative partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary institutions can be challenging to maintain, but they appear to offer advantages in creating programs to alleviate gaps in students’ college readiness.

Our work suggests the need for more rigorous effectiveness trials of programs and studies of their costs and benefits. Program leaders, college and high school administrators, and policymakers would benefit from more high-quality information on which of these programs have the greatest impact given different levels of investment.

Those seeking to implement college readiness partnership programs should choose interventions that show the greatest promise in a given context. This selection should reflect current research on effective practice. Since many programs can only serve limited numbers of students, institutions may want to match college-going students who are academically underprepared with more intensive programs and direct those students who primarily need assistance with college knowledge to less intensive programs. Institutions would also benefit from planning early for common challenges,

including student recruitment and participation and program sustainability.

Colleges and high schools forming partnerships should consider ways to maximize the benefits derived from them. They may wish to:

- **deepen existing partnerships to promote cost efficiencies, long-term program sustainability, and systemic changes, such as the improved alignment of curriculum and assessment practice;**
- **use partnerships to eliminate redundant services and align remaining services to reduce the resources required to support college readiness programming; and**
- **use intermediaries to support and complement the roles of the key partnership institutions.**

Earning a postsecondary credential has become essential for securing a good job in today's labor market. Yet currently, the pathway from high school to college does not reliably lead to a college degree. If high schools and colleges partner to improve the creation, enhancement, and alignment of supports for transitioning students, they may be able to help more students attain a degree and help the country to meet its goals for college completion and a stronger economy.

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