Strategies to Improving College Readiness

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Abstract

In this practice brief, we will look into the issue of college readiness and different strategies to better prepare high school students as their get ready to transition to college. We will start by introducing the issue of college readiness and its relevance. Then we will look into the characteristics of academically under prepared students, explore different strategies elaborated in our readings, and then implications for high school and community colleges leaders. The sources used for this paper consist of peer reviewed articles, a book and journal.

Framework

This paper will consist of seven sections: College Readiness, Characteristic of Community College students, Intervention and Strategies, Dual Enrollment, Limitations, Implication to Practice and a Conclusion.

The first section College readiness, will introduce the concept, gives some facts with statistics, and then provide the four keys strategies that will be elaborated. The second section Characteristic of Community College Students addresses more the identities and socio-economic realities of the majority of students that attend community colleges. The third section Intervention and Strategies is where we go in depth with each of the strategies enumerated in the first section. This section will be broken down in four different sub-sections which are the four key strategies. The fourth section was initially labelled other strategies, but I changed it to just Dual Enrollment. In this section, we address this other strategy and talk about some research and experiments that were done and elaborate on the findings. The fifth section in limitation is self-explanatory. We will look into the challenges that may be encountered in trying to implement some initiatives related to college readiness. In the sixth section, we give a summarized advice on what needs to take place as far as initiatives. In the last section which is the conclusion, we will talk about the different gap in

literature of some of the sections, and also mention that the strategies we enumerated are only a handful, and that there are others that can also be explored.

College Readiness

The purpose of this brief draft is to provide strategies for increasing college readiness. College readiness is defined as the amount of preparation a student needs to enroll in credit-bearing courses and persist to graduation (Duncheon, 2014). It is a prevalent issue in higher education. "Less than 50 percent of new college students earn an associate degree within three years or a bachelors' degree within six" (Provasnik and Planty, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics 2011) (as cited in Karp, 2012, p. 21). It is important that we start preparing students while in high school. "to some extent poor postsecondary outcomes are related to low levels of academic preparation (Roska et al. 2009; Bailey, Jeong, and Cho 2010) (as cited in Karp, 2012, p. 22) This can be done by implementing programs that will aim to equip students with knowledge and skills that will make them college ready. Universities administrators along with student affairs educators should care about this issue as it pertains to retention success and institutions completion/graduation rates. College readiness consists of 4 keys: Cognitive Strategies, Content Knowledge, Transition Knowledge and Skills, and Learning skills and Techniques (Conley, 2012). We will elaborate on each element in the following lines.

Characteristics of Community College Students

First, it is important to know and understand the background and realities of students that Community colleges serve. Understanding that will lead to answering the question: why is college readiness important to students in general, and those entering community colleges in particular. This question is not what this paper is about, but it highlights the importance of college readiness. A main driver for students to access community colleges as their first, and sometimes only, higher education institutions is due to their demographic characteristics

highly correlated with situational factors (i.e., family, responsibilities, socio-economic status). Community college students are for the most mart non-traditional, attend part-time and are from families with lower socioeconomic status. (Lester, 2014). We can infer based on this that many of these students attended public high schools that were underfunded, where they do not get the proper preparation for college. Community college students have lower level of academic preparation and achievement in high school which often leads to needing developmental education (Bailey and Alfronso, 2005) as cited in (Lester, 2014). Community colleges also serve a disproportionate number of Spanish-speaking students. Many students of Hispanic background are academically underprepared upon entry to college (Crisp & Nora, 2010) as cited in (Levin & Kater, 2013, p.90).

Interventions and Strategies

Develop Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are the ways of thinking that are necessary for college-level work (Conley, 2012). They include problem solving, research, interpretation, reasoning, precision and accuracy (Conley, McGaughy and Irvine, 2009). Students need to be taught how to think as it is necessary to construct and retain new knowledge. "College faculty nationwide express near-universal agreement that most students arrive unprepared for the intellectual demands and expectations of postsecondary education" (Conley, McGaughy and Irvine, 2009). Students have a tough time dealing with anything outside of their routine and that requires them to think.

For this strategy, it is imperative that institutions work on developing programs that will focus on problem solving, research, interpretation, reasoning, and organizing new language. By developing these cognitive skills, students will be equipped with tools to navigate college successfully. There is a gap in literature as I had a tough time finding

materials that have examples of specific programs that were designed to improve cognitive strategies, and what contributed to the success and or limitations.

Develop Content Knowledge

Content knowledge refers to overarching academic skills: reading and writing, and core academic subjects knowledge and skills: English, mathematics, science, social studies, world languages and arts (Radcliffe and Bos, 2013).

Students who come to college with low level in reading, writing and math have a higher chance to struggle to the standard expected in college. College requires a level of technical writing and most if not all students are required to complete a science or math class. It is very imperative that students are prepared and brought to a level that will allow them to be successful in college.

In regard to content knowledge, I also had a tough time finding materials that address specific programs that were created and the level of success and/or failure encounter, and why. I need more research are needed, which will help us have a better grasp on the impact of these programs.

Increase College Knowledge

College knowledge is defined as the privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture (Radcliffe and Bos, 2013). "Researchers found that student college aspirations decline over time; that high school students get most of their information about college from teachers and parents; and that they are largely unaware of college course requirements, placement testing, and financial aid. College admission is a "knowledge intensive process," (Conley, 2007).

One strategy will be to create program(s) that specifically focus on building and improving college knowledge. Effective programs will provide college exposure by

conducting campus visits, hosting programs on college campuses, and providing opportunities for high school students to earn college credits. (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 78). It will also be necessary to create initiatives that will facilitate young people's relationships with adults who can answer their questions about college, guide them through the admission process, and provide them with knowledge of financial resources (scholarships, and all) that will make education more accessible. (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 79). By implementing these types of programs, students will have a real grasp of what colleges is, and understand what it takes to not only get there, but also success at that level.

Develop Learning Skills and Techniques

Learning skills and techniques refers to academic behaviors that generally relate to self-management that includes range of behaviors that reflect greater student's self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control necessary to college success (Radcliffe and Bos, 2013). Key learning skills and techniques consists of two categories: student ownership of learning, and specific learning techniques. Student ownership of learning includes goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, motivation, help seeking, and self-efficacy. Specific learning techniques, include time management, study skills, strategic reading, memorization techniques, collaborative learning, technology skills, and self-monitoring. (Conley, 2012). By being aware of this, institutions can work on creating programs or learning activities aiming to develop those learning skills and specific techniques.

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Dual Enrollment

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Dual enrollment can serve as an intervention in which future college students learn about interpersonal interactions, and behaviors expected for college students. By being put in positions in which they can try on the role of a college student, dual enrollees benefit from early exposure and practices, coming to feel comfortable in a college environment and

ultimately becoming successful (Karp, 2012, p. 22-23). Dual enrollment allows students to role rehearse, and get ready for by learning, before they matriculate all aspects of being a college student

Melinda Karp lead a research in which she engaged in a semester-long study of students in a dual enrollment program. The data collected consisted of a series of semi structured interviews with twenty-six high school students enrolled in courses offered through two community colleges in New York city (Karp, 2012, p. 23-24). The findings were grouped in two categories. First, students in dual enrollment learn about the role college students. At the beginning of the semester, students did not enter the program with a clear understanding and definition of what it means to be a college student. By the end of the semester, one of the interviewees, Maria was able to describe in a page long report what it means to be a college student compared to her initial report which could be summarized in three short paragraphs. "In her third interview, she also touched on a range of skills, behaviors, and attitudes required of college students, and most important was able to provide strategies for college success (Karp, 2012, p. 25).

Limitations

Some of the limitations I see are finances, time, partnership, federal and state support etc. It will cost to implement these programs as they have to design curriculums, find instructors to teach them, keep facilities open for extended hours, etc. In regard to partnerships, it will be necessary to have colleges work with local high schools and share perspectives on the level of skills required and all so that the curriculum is tailored to set students for success. Those colleges and high school need to see eye to eye and understand the importance and need for college readiness. Also, it can be difficult for states and federal

government to be open to financing college readiness initiatives. Using data and numbers to prepare a case to show the vitality of college readiness may be needed.

Another challenge is that "Readiness discourse consequently tends to focus on the individual rather than the sociocultural context in which the student is embedded. This approach engenders two implicit assumptions: all students need the same competencies to succeed in higher education, and failure to earn a postsecondary credential is attributable to the individual (not-ready) student (Duncheon, 2014). This infers that it will be important to understand the background of the individuals that we are tailoring these programs for. These strategies should not be seen as a "one size fit all" type of initiatives as students are different. For community college for examples we do have students from low socioeconomically backgrounds, we have first generation college students, we have racial minorities, we have adult learners, etc. It is also important to mention that we have students who hold 1,2,3 or maybe all of these identities, and their needs will be different. The time needed in a specific program to master a skill will also vary. Let's say we have a Dual enrollment initiative that runs for 6-8 months. We will have students who after completing the program will feel like they got the skills and are ready for the next level, and we will have some other students who may need to retake the course at least one more time in order to fully master it. This may require extra funding, will can be a big limitation.

I had a tough time finding literature on challenges/limitations of college readiness. I think we would all benefits from reading findings on potential research, which will help us narrow down the limitations, and maybe work on finding ways to solve them, or at least reduce their impact.

Implication for Practice

The information in this paper suggest that there is evidence that the population served by community colleges will benefit tremendously from college readiness. The strategies

suggest that implementing programs and initiatives centered around using some of those key components as learning objectives will increase students level of college preparedness. In regard to the challenges or limitations to college readiness, there was a gap in literature. We understand that finances, partnerships and time will be clear challenges. When it comes down to federal and state assistance with funding, this may not necessarily be the reality of all school districts. It will be interesting to compare school districts that receive support with those who do not and see the impact on the programs in place.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to highlight strategies to improve college readiness for students entering community college. We see that these students need to be prepared and equipped with tools that will allow them to succeed at the college level. There is a need for more research on specific programs at different institutions that aim to improve cognitive skills, content knowledge, and also limitations of implementing college readiness strategies. The strategies we talked about in this paper, are few of so many.

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