

USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF AN EARLY COLLEGE - COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP

About the school: The Early College High School was founded in 2005, and is affiliated with the Community College. The school serves about 250 students per year in grades 9-12. The school is designed so that Early College students may earn up to two years of college credit while they are enrolled in high school.

Issue: Early College High School students were frequently testing into remedial English at the college. Both the college and school wanted students to enroll in a credit-bearing college courses, rather than remedial courses, and wanted to figure out how to provide high school instruction that would be equivalent to what is covered in the college's remedial English. This would insure that students had the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the first college credit-bearing course.

Area of investigation: How can we better prepare students through writing tasks and instruction across the curriculum to be college ready and eligible to enter the college's first-year English course?

To identify the problem, a team of Early College and Community College faculty and staff reviewed the data on how students scored on the English ACCUPLACER (a college placement test that assesses the level of college courses that students are prepared to take). They were concerned with how many were failing or barely passing and the areas or sections that were most difficult for students. They also looked at students' high school English course grades. The team developed a matrix that showed students' scores on the ACUPLACER, and high school English courses. While the matrix showed a correlation between how students were doing on the ACUPLACER and in their high school English courses, the team realized that they needed more information.

In order to gain a better sense of students' level of preparation, the team decided to implement CRITERION, an ETS-produced, web-based application that evaluates students' writing skills and provides scored reporting and diagnostic feedback to both writing instructors and students. Early College faculty in each of the core content area (English, math, science, and history) received training and began to use CRITERION mid-way through the Fall semester. Over the course of the semester, the team used data from CRITERION to examine how well the Early College's academic program was preparing students to enter the first year college English courses.

One teacher observed that, "CRITERION was very helpful in getting all the teachers to create writing assignments, even in science and math, and then using data from those assignments to assess students' writing performance."

The Early College English teachers also began using the same competency exams as are used in the college's remedial English class, with the goal of tracking the relationship of those scores with students' subsequent college English grades.

The faculty's strong belief that writing is a critical representation of students' thinking and a reasonable proxy for college readiness led them to focus on implementing writing instruction and tasks across all disciplines. Teachers used CRITERION for multiple written assignments during the Fall and Spring semesters.

The data generated from these activities resulted in a number of changes in the school’s approach to preparing students for college.

Use of CRITERION enabled the school to implement writing across the curriculum. Teachers of other disciplines realized it was “their responsibility – not to teach in isolation,” but to make sure they included a writing component as well. In one teacher’s view, “The greater emphasis on assessment helped the faculty to conclude that being college ready meant being able to synthesize ideas across disciplines, something that in turn requires common writing across the curriculum.”

English teachers reworked their class to “mirror” what the college remedial course does, so that they would be able show the college that the high school students had had the preparation needed to enter credit-bearing English courses. To that end, they began using the same competency exams used in the remedial class.

The discussions of the Early College and Community College team about the data provided for shared faculty exploration of the components of college readiness and how to define and measure college readiness. As a result, they came up with a set of skills – Time management, Organization, Engagement, and Study Skills (TOES) – that they are working to integrate across the curriculum in grades 9 and 10. According to one member of the team, “Talking [about college readiness] helped us to come up with that, which is the core of our program, really. [It was] something we were doing, but we had to articulate it, and it makes students and teachers accountable.”

The team also set a new goal of identifying patterns in students’ writing and providing data useful to the development of school-wide pedagogical adjustments that address writing deficiencies. In addition, they committed to pursuing a closer relationship with the college English department, including planning time and joint professional development.

Teachers were constantly reminded through their interactions with students that there is no silver bullet answer to making students college-ready. And there are barriers to doing everything a school believes would be desirable. One teacher said, “Teachers love what they do, and are dedicated and care about making it better, but they don’t get time to do it, and they don’t get paid for it.”

“Just because a student can do something on a test, they may not be college ready. Tests are limited in what they show about students’ abilities and other ways of demonstrating college readiness – and gaining entry into college-level courses – are needed.”