CCRC BRIEF

Pathways to College Access and Success

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How can we help all youth have smoother and more successful transitions to college? Credit-Based Transition Programs (CBTPs) such as Tech Prep, dual or concurrent enrollment, International Baccalaureate, and middle college high schools may provide one answer. These programs allow high school students to take college-level classes and earn college credit. Some CBTPs also provide services to support the many aspects of college transition.

Credit-based transition programs are widespread and interest in them by policymakers, parents, educators, and students has increased in recent years. For the 2002-03 school year, 71 percent of public high schools reported that students took courses for dual credit, meaning that they took a course for both high school and college credit (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005).

In the recent past, CBTPs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) have tended to enroll academically proficient and high-achieving students. Today, a growing number of policymakers, education reform groups, and researchers argue that middle- and even low-achieving high school students may benefit from participation in these programs (AASCU, 2002; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). Thus, while CBTPs are not new, the idea that they should be accessible to a broader range of students is a new approach.

This Brief summarizes the final report from the *Accelerating Student Success through Credit-Based Transition Programs* study. That study, which was initiated by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), examined the ways that CBTPs may help middle- and low-achieving students enter and succeed in college. The final report presents findings from case studies of five diverse CBTPs. The sites included a middle college high school in California, an International Baccalaureate program in Minnesota, a dual enrollment program in New York City, a technically-oriented dual enrollment program in Iowa, and a Tech Prep program in Texas.

Findings

Below, we highlight findings regarding four key program features—student recruitment and selection processes, curriculum, support services, and data collection and use. For each feature, we investigated the current practices of the case study sites, identified those practices that seemed most promising in meeting the needs of middle- and low-achieving students, and identified barriers to implementing them.

Student Recruitment and Selection. Given this study's focus on the promise of expanding CBTPs to middle- and low-achieving students, the five programs' student recruitment procedures and approaches were a particularly significant area of study. The selection of programs for the study was based on assurances that they were accessible to a wide range of students. We found, however, that open participation does not necessarily ensure broad access.

At the sites studied, student recruitment is typically unstructured, with the result that the students who apply and participate are the most motivated ones. Reliance on word-of-mouth for recruitment does not maximize knowledge about the program among the student body. Thus, the reliance on informal recruitment practices can pose barriers to entry.

While some sites set admissions requirements—using grade-point averages, test scores, and student essays to screen program participants—others have no such requirements, and students need only sign up to participate. Sites struggle to balance access with the desire to ensure student and program success. The academic and social-skill demands of the programs can restrict access for low-achieving students, and in some cases the postsecondary partners reinforce the importance of setting entry standards. Instructors mentioned that students need to be mature to participate.

Another reason sites encounter difficulty recruiting a range of students is a significant lack of understanding of the program's purpose and its target students. The perception by some students that the programs target an elite and non-diverse population helps to perpetuate narrow participation. And in some sites, the CBTP is not well understood even by school staff. For example, some guidance counselors know of the program but not well enough to counsel students to enroll in it. Moreover, some teachers and guidance

counselors who are not involved in the program actively discourage some students from enrolling.

Curriculum. Each of the five case-study sites has created a multi-course curriculum culminating in college-level courses. Curricula fall into three sometimes overlapping categories: *high school coursework* that gives students the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college-level classes; *developmental coursework* explicitly designed to prepare students for the demands of college-level work; and *college credit coursework.*

The five sites use regular high school courses to prepare students for college in two ways. The first explicitly links the high school curriculum to college course expectations. Although the extent to which high school and college coursework are linked varies significantly among teachers, the programs in three of the sites make deliberate attempts to align the demands of high school and college-level courses.

The second approach, taken by two of the sites, simply assumes that regular high school courses prepare students for college-level work. However, when high school courses and the CBTPs are not explicitly linked, there is no way to ensure that high school coursework prepares students for admission to college credit courses, or even to college generally. For example, completion of high school biology is seen as evidence that students are prepared to enter the Health Careers Academy, the program studied in Iowa, but the basis for health sciences courses—human biology—is not covered in the high school course.

At some of the sites, the CBTP staff does not rely exclusively on the regular high school curriculum to prepare students for college courses. Additional classes—developmental course work—are offered to explicitly address the skills and knowledge students need in college courses, and also serve as a way of including a broad range of students in the CBTP. In the New York City program, for example, developmental courses such as the community college's remedial English class are given at the high school to help students improve their skills so that they can proceed to college credit coursework. Other developmental courses have been created specifically for the CBTP.

Three of the study sites offer the college credit course component at the high school, with high school instructors certified as college adjuncts or trained in IB curricula teaching the courses. Only one site has students taking college credit courses on the college campus with regularly matriculated college students. At the fifth site, high school students in the dual enrollment program comprise their own class, which meets at a college satellite center. The instructor is a college adjunct, not a teacher at the high school.

The control exercised by colleges over the curriculum and its delivery varies. Some exercise tight control; others give the high school more leeway in implementing course objectives. Although it can make sense to give high schools flexibility in program delivery, there is evidence in some instances that the courses, or portions of them, do not resemble work typically found in a college course. For example, some teachers replace long readings with shorter ones so as not to overburden students.

Curricular pathways—high school courses that are aligned with college admissions requirements, and developmental coursework that leads to college credit courses—appear to be promising in meeting the needs of students from a range of academic backgrounds. Although every site in the study has some sort of curricular pathway, not all of them create pathways leading from one level to another. As a result, in the ones that do not, college courses are not a capstone experience for students, and the rigor of the courses does not necessarily increase over time. In other sites, each step in the pathway serves a distinct purpose in preparing students for college-level work.

Support Services. There is considerable variation in the kinds of support services that are available to students in the CBTPs. Services vary as to whether they provide academic support; personal support; or specific college-preparatory activities, such as assistance with college applications or financial aid. They also vary in whether they are offered by the high school, by the college, or through a collaboration of the two.

Because high schools are limited in the services they can offer—for example, the New York City school in the study has only one college counselor for 700 seniors—the additional supports provided by the CBTP are important to helping students succeed in their transition to college. While academic advising is usually done with the program coordinators or regular high school counselors, non-academic services are essential in assisting students meet the demands of a postsecondary environment, particularly for students who have not previously been successful in school.

Career exploration is available in some of the CBTPs. Students in the Iowa program, for example, have opportunities for structured career exploration in the healthcare field. The program also offers multiple job-shadowing experiences, which are coordinated by the college and a non-profit intermediary partner. The Texas program offers work-based learning experiences as part of the curriculum, and, since many of the Tech Prep teachers have industry experience, they are able to provide information to students about different career paths.

One kind of college preparation that CBTPs have the potential to provide is knowledge of and a sense of comfort with the college environment. However, the sites we studied did not consistently engage in activities supporting this knowledge. For example, although students at some of the sites can use the college facilities, the extent to which they do is

unclear. Personal and social supports are also not prevalent at these five sites, and we found no formal mentoring.

Only in the California and New York sites do the students really make use of support services provided by the college. In the California program, students enrolled in college courses have access to all of the college's facilities and services. Students can use three different counseling centers on the college campus as well as the high school counseling office. That the CBTP is located on the college campus means that the students can easily take advantage of the range of services offered. Even so, ensuring that students know about the services and make use of them requires a focused effort.

Services that are the most unique and hardest to categorize—providing academic and personal support as well as college and career preparation—come from collaboration between the high school and college institutions. In the New York program, the high school and college coordinators collaborate to create social, college-based activities that also support academic learning. Many of those activities, targeted towards students in the entry levels of the program, include cultural events at the college and field trips to other institutions in New York City. In California, collaboration between the institutions' counseling staffs also brings about the creation of activities especially for the CBTP students.

Data Collection and Use and Perceived Benefits of the Programs. Study participants indicate that there are three primary benefits to students who participate in CBTPs: the opportunity to earn free college credit, gaining "a taste" of college, and increased confidence in their academic abilities. However, these perceived benefits are not yet supported by evaluation research. There is insufficient data to assess whether students, particularly middle- and low-achieving students, realize these outcomes from their program participation. Because most sites do not have systematic data collection procedures, program evaluation is difficult. Moreover, most of the data available at the sites indicate short-term outcomes. There is little data-sharing between high school and college partners, and many sites lack staff time and knowledge to collect and use data effectively.

Recommendations

Three broad areas should be addressed by programs and policymakers seeking to help middle- and low-achieving students enroll and be successful in CBTPs: student access, institutional collaboration, and data collection for program evaluation.

Student Access. To encourage broad participation programs should:
- *Develop multiple ways to ensure that all students—regardless of academic background and level of motivation—learn about the credit-based transition program.*

This entails giving all students information about the program early enough and often enough in their academic careers to allow them to plan to participate. This information should be shared with students frequently so that those with less access to information sources are likely to learn about and enroll in the program. And, simply providing the information is not sufficient; students must also be made aware of the benefits of participating.

To ensure that all students—including those not usually seen as college-bound—learn about the program and have the opportunity to enroll, programs should initiate formal recruitment strategies involving middle and high school guidance counselors, parents, and teachers. Some screening of students is necessary because students must have adequate academic and personal preparation if they are to succeed in college-level courses.
- *Develop a program culture that supports and encourages students from different backgrounds and academic levels to participate.*

Students need to feel comfortable in the program. They need to see students like themselves participating in CBTP activities and to feel that their academic needs and concerns are being met. Programs are beginning to address this issue by seeking to change the reputation of the program, targeting activities at under-represented students, and using support services to create a CBTP culture that feels comfortable to students not previously or frequently involved.
- *Structure the program and the curriculum with an eye towards increasing access.*

A developmental sequence of courses can help to maintain access for middle-and low-achieving students who need opportunities to build their skills before attempting college-level courses. Curricular pathways with multiple access points ensure that students at all levels can enter the program. A program in which CBTP coursework is part of the regular school schedule is likely to help more students participate, as opposed to an after-school program. Programs should also be attentive to encouraging access for special education and ELL students, who may have additional needs beyond the opportunities available through the programs' developmental pathway.

Policymakers should support practitioners in these practices. States can provide incentives for programs that enroll middle- and low-achieving students. Although the programs studied were in states that did not strongly restrict student access and were attuned to broad access, it did not seem that the programs were reaching their target population: disengaged, underachieving students

who might not view college as a realistic option.

Institutional Collaboration. In order to promote meaningful collaboration, programs and policymakers should:

- *Clearly establish the roles and benefits for each institution in the partnership.*

Collaboration appears to be most successful when all partners perceive that they are receiving benefits from the partnership, or when particular goals drive strong commitment at the top levels of leadership. It does not seem to matter whether goals are self-interested or altruistic, as long as they lend themselves to a commitment to sustaining the program. Collaboration can be formal or informal and can occur between the leaders of institutions, or between the staffs or instructors.

- *Support broader integration between the secondary and postsecondary sectors.*

CBTPs require and promote deeper institutional changes than implied by the word "collaboration." High schools and colleges must overcome their structural differences to integrate their goals, practices, and services. Such widespread integration—and its potential impact—mirrors the goals of the larger K-16 movement, in which high schools and colleges are encouraged to work together to create a seamless education system.

Policymakers can do a great deal to support the difficult task of integrating secondary and postsecondary education. They can compel the two institutional sectors to rethink and align their standards, curriculum, and assessment practices. Aligning high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements would be an important first step. Articulation of high school with college coursework would also help students transitioning to college know that they are prepared.

- *Simplify the credit-earning and credit-transfer process.*

Credit-earning in some of the sites is quite complicated. The extent to which students retain their credits as they matriculate to different postsecondary institutions is unclear. Policymakers should take steps to ensure that earning credits through CBTP participation is not an onerous process and that the credits are easily transferable.

Data Collection for Program Evaluation. To provide information on program effectiveness to policymakers and practitioners, it is imperative to:

- *Support the gathering of student-level data than can be used for outcomes analyses.*

Policymakers should support outcomes analyses that begin with students' performance prior to program participation, include comparison groups, and follow students through college matriculation and graduation. This will require secondary and postsecondary sectors to share data and use common student identifiers. Researchers should help program administrators collect these data in forms that lend themselves to rigorous analyses and use the data for internal evaluations and improvement efforts.

The findings from the Accelerating Student Success study lend credence to the enthusiasm many policymakers and educators have for CBTPs. They have the potential to help a wide range of students, not only the most academically advanced, but also middle- to low-achieving students, become prepared for postsecondary education.

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