

# Analysis of the Relative Merits of College Readiness Reading Programs in Addressing the Achievement Gap

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**Abstract:** College readiness among high school students — particularly those who are from low-income families or have other at-risk factors — is declining. Research indicates that students entering college today are no more equipped to handle the rigors and demands of a successful college course load than students in the 1970s. As a result, many programs have been developed to reach certain benchmarks of student readiness in reading and reading comprehension. The Common Core Standards, while most pervasive, are not the sole measure of student college readiness. Other states and institutions have developed their own pilot programs to assess the effects of various methods of reading and instructional programs on the need for remediation for college students. This article explores some of those programs, assesses their relative success levels, and provides recommendations for further development of college readiness reading programs.

**Key words:** at-risk students, collaborative learning, college readiness, common core standards, low-income students

## 1. Introduction

The achievement gap among American college students is well documented. Although more and more high school graduates prepare for college by taking the ACT, only 26% of all test takers met all four of the benchmarks — English, reading, mathematics and science — for college readiness; only 47% of test takers met even one benchmark (Bidwell, 2014). This is troubling in a country where the costs of higher education continue to rise nearly unchecked and where a college degree is becoming more and more difficult to obtain. Without proper college readiness, students may spend a great deal of their time and money upon entering college on simply getting caught up or reaching remedial benchmarks.

ACT, the mission-driven nonprofit organization that administers the ACT test, released an updated list of college and career readiness standards for reading in 2014. The ACT considers a score of 22 to be the benchmark — that is, students who earn a score of 22 or higher have a greater than 50% likelihood of earning a B or higher in a first-year college social science course (ACT, 2014). Students are scored on their readiness for college courses on a range of criteria including Close Reading, Central Ideas, Themes, and Summaries, Relationships, Word Meanings and Word Choice, Text Structure, Purpose and Point of View, Arguments, and Multiple Texts. Scores in

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each category range from 13 to 36. This comprehensive readiness rubric and assessment was first developed in 1959 as a competitor to the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and as a way to better measure accumulated knowledge (Fletcher, 2009). The reading portion of the ACT spans 40 questions over 35 min and aims to measure reading comprehension in students preparing for college admission. This measurement, however, reveals some troubling facts.

## 2. Literature Review

In a 2006 study published by ACT, test results revealed that “student readiness for college-level reading is at its lowest point in more than a decade” and “only 51 percent of 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates are ready for college-level reading” (ACT, 2006). Additionally, the report revealed that minority students and students from low-income families showed even lower levels of college readiness than their more affluent or White peers.

College readiness in reading comprehension is at a distressing low. Both policymakers and educational institutions have taken steps to correct the gross imbalance (Savitz-Romer & Jager-Hyman, 2009). A variety of strategies have been implemented with varying levels of success. This article explores some of those strategies and methods and evaluates their relative success and failure as regards college readiness among students after program completion.

Common Core, the high-quality academic standards and learning goals used by educators and administrators, outline what students should be expected to learn at the completion of each grade. Today, 43 states use Common Core Standards, and research into their effectiveness is ongoing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). While proponents claim that English and Language Arts Standards for the Common Core allow students to better develop critical thinking and reasoning skills, detractors consider the standards to be at best incomplete and at worst dismissive of students from nontraditional backgrounds (Bauerlein, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2009). Several programs have been developed to both supplement and replace the Common Core Standards.

Because college readiness among low-income and minority students is even lower than among White or middle-income students (ACT, 2006), many communities have implemented readiness programs aimed specifically at these at-risk demographics. In North Carolina, Elon University, a private liberal arts college, houses a program called the Elon Academy. The program serves as “a comprehensive program aimed at addressing all aspects of college readiness” (Pyne, 2012, p. 1). The majority of Elon Academy students are from low-income and minority families — 30% of students are Black, 30% Hispanic, 30% White, and 10% multiracial — the program faces unique challenges in attempting to prepare students for college. Administrators at Elon Academy found that “college reading was an area in which participants felt particularly unprepared [especially regarding] vocabulary level and amount of reading required” (Pyne, 2012, p. 1). To address issues of reading comprehension and instill sophisticated reading habits, Elon Academy instituted a Book Jam, modeled on the popular adult book clubs. The program elicited a positive reaction from 92% of students who completed it, and 100% of students were in favor of continuing the program. More than positive feedback, the program helps students to develop reading habits consistent with behavior that has been shown to lead to success in college. “College readiness hinges upon facility and confidence with texts of all kinds” (Pyne, 2012, p. 3). By assisting students who face additional academic challenges to establish reading lifestyles, Elon Academy has found a creative solution to college readiness.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

With the understanding that 40% of students who enter college require some level of remediation (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006), many programs have been established in which secondary schools and universities work together to reduce the need for remediation for students matriculating at college. Creech and Clouse (2013) reported on one such program between four high schools and one university in Kentucky. In this program, college readiness assessments are addressed in high school before students enter either a 2-year or 4-year college, thereby alleviating or lessening the need for remediation in reading once students begin their college careers. The program in Kentucky created a professional learning community between high school and university educators and used a collaborative effort to ensure student college readiness and curtail the need for remediation. English transition courses (ETC) were implemented in the high schools participating in the program. High school teachers involved in the program developed curriculum for their English classes as well as “course content, instructional resources, student learning objectives, and best pedagogical practices based on Common Core Standards for Language Arts, Developmental Course syllabi, and school curriculum maps” (Creech & Clouse, 2013, p. 8). Teachers reviewed Common Core objectives, considered these objectives in relation to their individual district demographics and school climates, and developed their own list of objectives for college readiness in reading and writing. Using that list of objectives, the professional learning community offered two research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Will the implemented course result in significant student achievement?

**Research Question 2:** Will at least 50% of students enrolled in this course achieve college readiness? (Creech & Clouse, 2013).

Upon completion of the study, researchers found that 32% of students enrolled in ETC achieved college readiness in reading and 68% achieved college readiness in writing skills — both significant improvements in college readiness (Creech & Clouse, 2013).

A 2009 study by Cabrera et al. focused on measuring the impact that comprehensive intervention programs (CIP) have on the college readiness of at-risk students. For this study, at-risk was defined as low-income and/or minority students. The study focused on the state of California for its assessment of the relative success of CIP programs in advancing college readiness.

This study ultimately found that students attending schools that received funding for CIP programs did not perform statistically better than students attending schools without CIP funding. The researchers interpreted these results to mean that:

“The results of this study are more suggestive than conclusive in answering that policy question, they provide evidence that comprehensive and coordinated intervention programs may, indeed, be more effective than traditional approaches to promote the reading and math skills of low-income students as they progress toward college entry” (Cabrera et al., 2009, p. 18).

An additional method used by instructors is known as the reciprocal teaching (RT) technique. The RT technique “incorporates a variety of strategies to increase comprehension” (Gruenbaum, 2014, p. 110). Using the RT technique, students and teachers engage in a collaborative process that alternates between instructor-led and student-led discussions about assigned readings. The goal is to encourage student interaction and to create an environment where students learn not only from their instructors but also from their peers. Ultimately, the researchers determined that RT techniques are effective when tailored to specific student needs. RT “may be

utilized to enhance student comprehension and meta-comprehension” (Gruenbaum, 2014, p. 115), but it does not serve as a one-size-fits-all solution for college readiness among students.

#### **4. Results**

While considerations for college readiness are on the minds of many educational institutions and educators, a practical approach to address these issues is often elusive. Publications such as *Redefining College Readiness* (Conley, 2007), a report from the Educational Policy Improvement Center, have aimed to isolate issues that hold students back in their quest to be college ready. That report explored key cognitive strategies, knowledge measurement, contextual skills, and awareness measurement to determine the impacts of each on the often nebulous definition of college readiness. It also offered suggestions for “what schools and students can do to foster college readiness” (Conley, 2007, p. 25). However, many of the suggestions, such as “create a culture focused on intellectual development” and “provide necessary supports to students and teachers”, are vague and broadly focused. Without action-oriented steps, implementing changes necessary to increase student college readiness is at best difficult and at worst a misuse of time and resources. Instead of following vague guidelines to improve college readiness among students by encouraging them to read more and supporting their academic success, programs that build upon the Common Core Standards while implementing demographic specific material and instruction will most likely be the most successful.

Programs like Elon Academy and the Kentucky ETC program achieved success in improving college readiness and eliminating the need for remediation in college courses largely because both programs integrated Common Core Standards with an understanding of their specific communities. Recognition of the individuality of each student is critical to ensuring that student’s success and college readiness. In the Elon Academy program, for example, low-income students often have additional constraints on their time, as many must either work to support the family or care for younger siblings. Such responsibilities leave little time for reading. By instituting Book Jams in which students could either read silently or discuss books they had previously read, Elon Academy met student needs for a time and place in which to either read or explore reading (Pyne, 2012).

Likewise, the Kentucky ETC program indicates marked improvements in college readiness in both reading and writing skills among students enrolled in ETCs. These courses, while using core learning guidelines and skills, were also tailored to better represent the needs of each district and student group. Collaborative instruction and development led to student success as a result of the program’s ability to address specific student needs (Creech & Clouse, 2013).

#### **5. Conclusions and Future Study**

Ultimately, the success or failure of college reading programs that aim to increase college readiness depends on the availability of resources and the intelligent allocation of those resources. These programs require a significant investment of funding as well as time and, in the case of programs like Elon Academy (which provides a 1-month retreat for students), infrastructure. Because research shows that students from lower income families and from minority backgrounds display lower levels of college readiness than their middle to higher income White counterparts (ACT, 2006), allocating funding for cash-poor school districts to develop college preparatory reading programs is a near-impossible task.

However, policymakers are not unaware of the positive effects reading programs have on mitigating the need for remedial programs for students who enter 2- or 4-year colleges (Reis, Eckert, McCoach, Jacobs & Coyne, 2008). Many states are calling for increased investment in reading programs for K-12 students. The National Assessment Governing Board has begun to reassess what constitutes college readiness among students (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). And educators have begun developing guidelines for successful college reading programs aimed at enhancing college readiness among students by including components such as “substantial instructional minutes, authentic academic reading material, various instructional groupings, instruction on vocabulary and background knowledge, and modeling of college expectations” (Palmberg & Rask, 2014).

Current research indicates modest success for college reading programs in curtailing the need for remedial instruction for students entering 2- or 4-year colleges (Savitz-Roman & Jager-Hyman, 2009). More data are needed to determine a definitive success rate for these programs. However, current trends indicate that with the proper allocation of funding and resources and support from governments and policymakers, instructional college reading programs could earn a great return on investment in future years and for future generations of college-bound students.

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