

## **Significant Discussions: Aligning Secondary and Postsecondary Curriculum for Student Success**

**Presenters:** Rene Barrientos, Chairperson, Mathematics Department, Miami Dade College; Ted Coe, Scottsdale Community College Mathematics Chair and Maricopa Math Instructional Council Chair, Maricopa Community Colleges; Alycia Marshall, Interim Chair of Mathematics, Anne Arundel Community College; Cynthia Wilson, Vice President, Learning and Research, League for Innovation in the Community College

In the past decade, a number of leading voices in American K-16 education have decried a system in which, “Too many students across the country meet K-12 standards, pass state tests, and complete state-required courses only to be placed into remedial courses once they enroll in college or to find they are unqualified for training programs and skilled employment in the modern workplace” (Achieve, Inc., 2008, p. 1). The problem was identified as early as the 1990s, when, according to The Education Trust president, Kati Haycock, “it started being clear to us that a whole lot of kids who were following all the rules and doing fine on exams in high school were entering college and finding themselves having to take remedial courses and learning things they should have learned in high school” (Haycock, 2009). Compounding the problem is the fact that “the coursework between high school and college is not connected. Students graduate from high school under one set of standards and, three months later, are required to meet a different set of standards to enroll in college” (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2004, p. 2), and that high schools are “held accountable for achieving standards defined by their respective state departments of education. High-stakes exams measure how well students and schools meet those established state standards, and although students are required to pass the designated exam to receive a high school diploma, the standards on these exams are often calibrated at around a tenth-grade level” (League, 2010, p. 7).

With this lack of connection, the findings reported by Strong American Schools in *Diploma to Nowhere* (2008), are hardly surprising: 57 percent of students who require no remedial courses graduate within eight years of starting college; 29 percent of students who require one or two remedial courses graduate within eight years; and 19 percent of students who require four remedial courses graduate within eight years. With almost a million students in remediation at community and technical colleges at a cost of around 2 billion dollars (Strong American Schools, 2008), remediation represents an expensive investment with an inadequate return.

Community college educators are well aware of the challenges faced by students who do not meet the entry requirements for college-level courses, and they have been involved in numerous major projects funded by government agencies, private foundations, or their own institutions to improve the success and retention rates of students who take remedial courses. With very few exceptions, though, the resources developed by these projects have rarely been scaled to a level that has made a significant national impact on student success and retention. One reason may be that these projects have focused more on fixing a community college remediation problem than on eliminating the cause of the problem.

In *Significant Discussions: A Guide to Aligning Secondary and Postsecondary Curriculum*, the League for Innovation in the Community College (League, 2010), with support from MetLife Foundation, engaged community colleges and their secondary school partners in an iterative process to develop a handbook for holding curriculum alignment conversations. This guide, freely available on the League website ([www.league.org/significant-discussions](http://www.league.org/significant-discussions)), is designed to help decrease the need for remediation, thus allowing a significant portion of community college resources currently used in developmental courses to be reallocated to college-level courses or other academic support services. Since January 2012, the League has led a second *Significant Discussions* project, this time with a focus on aligning secondary and postsecondary math curriculum to ease student transitions between education sectors and to promote student success.

The second project, also supported by MetLife Foundation, conducted an audit of recent, relevant major projects and initiatives focused on developmental math and on easing student transitions from high school to college, including the research findings and teaching and learning resources produced by these projects; this audit is available at [www.league.org/significantdiscussions](http://www.league.org/significantdiscussions). Numerous projects focused on developmental math and/or student success have been conducted across the country, and many, if not all, of these projects potentially provide useful resources for secondary and postsecondary institutions that engage in the work of curriculum alignment through *Significant Discussions*. Easing access to the findings and resources developed through these initiatives is a step toward expanding their use to improve student learning and success. Resources designed for community college developmental math courses might be easily transferred to the secondary school setting to support curriculum alignment and to help high school students improve their math skills and abilities. If these students are college-ready when they graduate from high school, the need for remediation among recent high school graduates is reduced, and the likelihood of retention and completion is increased.

The project engaged nine participating community colleges and their respective secondary school partners in *Significant Discussions* to align secondary and postsecondary math curriculum and integrate major-project resources into the aligned curriculum. These partnerships have produced samples of the results of focused conversations between secondary and postsecondary educators, including plans and designs for aligned curriculum in math for grades 9-14. These samples are available at [www.league.org/significantdiscussions](http://www.league.org/significantdiscussions). The participating colleges are Anne Arundel Community College, MD; Central Piedmont Community College, NC; Lehigh Carbon Community College, PA; Maricopa Community Colleges, AZ; Miami Dade College, FL; San Diego Community College District, CA; Southwestern Oregon Community College, OR; Sinclair Community College, OH; and St. Louis Community College, MO.

In this presentation, representatives from three of the participating institutions—Anne Arundel Community College, Maricopa Community Colleges, and Miami Dade College—share their experiences in holding *Significant Discussions* with their secondary school partners. The project's director provides an overview of *Significant Discussions*.

## References

Achieve, Inc. (2008). *Out of Many, One: Toward Rigorous Common Core Standards From the Ground Up*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc. (Kramen, J. & Eresh, J.)

Haycock, K. (2009 September 21). Quoted in Lederman, D. "Defining 'College Ready,'" Nationally. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/09/21/core>.

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Strong American Schools. (2008). *Diploma to Nowhere*. Washington, DC: Strong American Schools.