Project Connect: Smoothing the Transition from High School to College

League for Innovation in the Community Colleges

Summer 2006

http://www.league.org/leaguetlc/express/inn0506.html

Moving from high school to the very different world of college can be difficult for even the most capable and mature students. But a collaborative team of high school and Berkshire Community College (BCC) faculty and staff in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, has created a way to ease the transition with Project Connect.

Project Connect is a two-week summer program for traditional-age students entering BCC. Developed under a Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant, this program serves approximately 50 students from county high schools each summer. Students have an opportunity to earn three college credits, improve their math placement, and get a heads up on differences between high school and college.

More than Summer School

Project Connect is not your typical summer program. High school and BCC faculty and staff teach together, and the curriculum is developed around a different work of nonfiction each year. The text threads components together to provide students with a cohesive learning-community experience. Components include English, Math, Technology, Wellness, Stop Action, and Career as Student.

Students are required to read the text prior to the program. In English the text and supplemental readings are used to introduce students to college-level reading and give them a sense of the reading workload in college. The intent is not to remediate but to help developmental-level students understand their placement and to acquaint all students with college expectations for written assignments and for the sort of work that goes on in any college English class.

In Math, students assess on Accuplacer and are grouped according to ability. They are given content review and an opportunity to reassess on the last day of the program. Math faculty also cover math applications tied to the text. With *The Perfect Storm*, for example, students learned about basic vector mathematics and how vectors are used to chart navigational courses.

In Technology, students sometimes use special software programs. For example, with *October Sky*, students used RockSim to simulate rocket flight. Technology also focuses on website evaluation and online research.

Wellness features icebreakers and stress-management opportunities such as yoga. But this component is also tied to the text. For example, with this summer's text, Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, Wellness faculty will focus on physical conditioning and the effects of oxygen deprivation on the body.

Two innovative components are Stop Action and Career as Student. Study skills are usually taught in isolation. However, Stop Action, created by Project Connect team

members, teaches study strategies in the context of academic lectures on topics from the summer's text. The lectures are choreographed by faculty lecturers and study-skills instructors. Together they choose the lecture topics and decide which skills to model during the lectures given during the two weeks. A Stop Action lecture begins, and then, at an agreed-upon point, the action of the academic lecture is stopped and skills such as note taking are modeled for students. Then the action of the lecture continues. Other strategies that are modeled include visual aids, memorization techniques, and reading and marking a text. Stop Action lectures have focused on topics such as The Great Depression and dance marathons, with *Seabiscuit* as text. During Stop Action lectures, students are given not only subject matter but, more important, the tools to learn and to remember that material. Experience has demonstrated that if students are shown study skills at the moment they need to use them, they see their immediate value, remember them, and are more apt to apply them than if they were taught these skills in isolation.

The Career as Student component was an outgrowth of one of the most valuable lessons learned from collaboration: how different the high school and college cultures are. The environments, expectations, languages, and pedagogies are very different, and when students enter college, they find it difficult to adjust to these.

For many high school students, the guidance counselor was a lifeline. When they enter college; they do not know how to advocate for themselves and are hesitant to seek out resources. They often fail to realize the importance of being proactive. Many students have misperceptions about college, seeing it as 13th grade. This leads to their working too many hours. Many lack the habits, skills, or commitment to meet the requirements of college work.

Making an Impact

Career as Student addresses differences between the high school and college cultures and acquaints students with academic and social expectations. Over the two weeks, topics such as college terminology, time management, and setting and reaching educational goals are covered. Instructors use a hands-on interactive approach. For example, to stress the importance of a professor's syllabus, students are provided with actual course outlines and sent through them on a small-scale scavenger hunt. Activities such as these are followed up by student-driven discussions wherein faculty discover students' concerns. Videos of BCC students and faculty who teach first-semester courses are also shown. Faculty videos focus on accessibility, expectations regarding workload, academic responsibility, and the problem most of our students face: balancing work and school.

Project Connect has had a remarkable impact on retention and math placement. Fall-to-spring retention rates average 88 percent over six years, compared with 64 percent for control groups. Fall-to-fall retention rates are also significantly higher: 73 percent, compared with 50 percent for control groups.

The math component of the program has been very effective. Some students do not take math in their senior year of high school, and even those who do tend to lose skills quickly. The math component shows that remediation is possible within a short period of time. 0ver six years, nearly 70 percent of program participants have improved their math scores when they retested at the end of the program. Depending on how motivated students are, significant gains are possible, regardless of level. For example, some

students move from basic arithmetic to elementary algebra. In summer 2004, 20 percent placed out of developmental math and into college-level math.

Project Connect has become an important program model for institutions across the country interested in developing or enhancing transitional programming and high school-college collaboration. In 2002, BCC received a second FIPSE grant to disseminate the program to six community colleges nationwide. Each will have piloted or repiloted its own Project Connect by summer 2005.

A project participant Madison Area Technical College (WI), following the BCC model and involving high school teachers in the planning and implementation of its Learning to Learn Camp have had enormous benefits. Lead faculty coordinator Karen Anderson says, "We better understand issues related to the students' transition from high school to college when we work with our colleagues from the high schools. Having both counselor and teachers as part of camp staff helps us better serve our new crop of students by remembering what it was like to be a high school student." Anderson also believes the importance of faculty working directly with staff from around the college, full and part time, cannot be overstated. With this project, "Bridges are being built within the college between our student service area - including student life, counseling, recruiting, orientation, to name a few - a faculty, which brings about an incredible appreciation for the gifts and talents that we all bring." MATC's program was piloted for 50 students in summer 2004. MATC is working on data collection now, but anecdotal suggests students who went through the program were already integrated into the institution at the start of the fall semester. MATC will repilot this summer and will target 100 entering students. Using a book for the college success program has aligned this initiative with a college wide program, Reading Together at MATC, and placed an emphasis on reading as an important part of the college experience.