

HTC's College Readiness Advocate Program: Overview and Evaluation

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Background of the Program

The problem of college readiness for incoming students has long been an issue in higher education, but nowhere is it a bigger problem than at two-year colleges with open enrollment policies. These schools often get the least-prepared students – often students of color, low-income, and first-generation – that four-year schools with stringent admissions criteria will not admit. In Minnesota, many schools have developed readiness programs designed to prepare these students to be successful in college. The University of Minnesota developed a program called Ramp-Up to Readiness (<http://www.rampuptoreadiness.org/>), Century College's Preparing to Achieve a College Education (P.A.C.E.) program led to the creation of a website to help teachers, students, and their families bridge the gap in college readiness (<http://century.brg.project.mnscu.edu/index.asp>) and Minnesota State Community and Technical College started The Center for College Readiness in 2008 to help middle school and high school students improve their reading, writing, and mathematics skills before they graduate from high school. Nationally, products such as the A+Advancer from Accuplacer and Pearson's My Foundations Lab are also designed to help students improve their readiness for college.

A major obstacle to the success of these and other college readiness initiatives and resources is the lack of a clear definition of "college readiness." The earliest resources were focused on making college accessible, especially financially. Later (and most current) resources

were designed to build the academic skills necessary for college success, and more recent resources are incorporating “soft skills” into the definition of college readiness. Because of their distinctly human presence, Hennepin Technical College’s readiness program seems more comprehensive than most other programs with similar goals.

The College Readiness Advocate Program at Hennepin Technical College arose out of research into MnSCU and national best practices focused on college readiness and is funded in large part by an Access and Opportunities grant. The overall goal of the program is to partner with area high schools to help their “middle quartile” students graduate from high school ready to attend college.

Aspects of readiness for the program include increasing students’ awareness of college and the importance of a college education in the world today. They want students to understand the academic skills they need to successfully take courses at college, and assess students’ academic readiness early enough so they can improve their weaknesses prior to high school graduation. Additionally, they help students understand the resources available to them to make college a real possibility: encouragement from parents and families, support from counselors at the high schools and colleges, and financial aid.

The program primarily focuses on four area high schools: Robbinsdale Cooper, Roosevelt High School, Minneapolis South, and Brooklyn Center (they have recently been invited to Hopkins High School as well). The driving forces of the program are the College Readiness Advocates, HTC employees who work in these schools on a regular basis. Starting with 9th and 10th graders, a Readiness Advocate works individually with students to discuss career interests and explain technical programming at HTC; the College also invites groups of students to tour HTC for hands-on demonstrations of specific programs. For 11th and 12th graders, the advocates

build on the initial contact with students and hold more specific individual planning sessions. They also administer the Accuplacer placement test and interpret the results on site. If necessary, they assign Advancer tutorials, then retest. Students are also invited to the HTC campus for a tour.

The advocates all go through the same training process prior to placement in the high schools. After initial training at the College and before they work on their own, new advocates shadow in the schools with Ricardo Gonzalez, the lead of the Readiness Advocate program. They also go through the College Connector Training program through the MN College Access Network. Lastly, the advocates all meet regularly to discuss how the program is going and how to better serve the students with whom they work.

Of absolute importance to the Readiness Advocate program is communication with and buy-in from the schools in which they work. To a large degree, HTC tailors the advocates' approach in the schools to that school's needs. In some cases, faculty, counselors, and administrators are much more enthusiastic about the regular presence of HTC staff in their schools than others. A model partnership has developed between Robbinsdale Cooper High School and Hennepin Technical College. The Cooper principal has made creating a college-going culture a priority at the school. The football coach has been instrumental at directing failing students toward the advocates, and the school's counselor and support staff work to make sure every student has multiple opportunities throughout their high school years to meet with the advocates and prepare for college. Without this level of buy in, the relationships between other schools and the HTC Readiness Advocates have not been as effective.

The average age of students at HTC is 31, so a major impetus for the Readiness Advocate program was increasing the visibility of HTC programming among area high school students. By

maintaining a regular presence in these high schools, students will see HTC as a viable option for learning the skills necessary for reaching their career goals. As a technical college, one goal of the Readiness Advocate program is preparation for entry into a technical career program(s), but the overall goal is for students to graduate and enroll in college anywhere. The main metric of the Readiness Advocate program is the rate at which the students with whom the advocates work graduate from high school; the theory is that increasing their motivation to complete high school will show students a future pathway to post-secondary education.

Evaluation and Recommendations

HTC's College Readiness Advocate is a wonderful opportunity for working with high school students individually to prepare them for college. Evaluations of readiness programs throughout the U.S. indicate the increasing presence of readiness programs in U.S. high schools. Most of the interventions that make up the HTC program are found in other readiness programs in Minnesota and other states. Though most facets of the program are not unique innovations, the direct and regular contact provides a personal connection to specific students that many similar programs at other colleges do not attempt.

One potential problem with the program is that there is not a clear way to measure the impact of the program. The advocates are clearly passionate about student success and are trying everything they can think of to prepare students for college, but this scattershot approach makes it impossible to determine what is working and what is not. As a result, it is almost impossible to tell if the Readiness Advocate intervention has made an impact on students or not. While they track every student they contact through high school graduation, they cannot determine what – if any – of the strategies they tried has had an effect on the students. Exit interviews of students

asking them about how the Readiness Advocate program worked for them would help, and it would be very interesting to track these students through college as well to see if they were successful in college. At this time, however, they can only track those students who matriculate to Hennepin Technical College. A related issue is the methodology used in the Readiness Advocate program. The approach to the problem of college readiness is inconsistent from school to school and advocate to advocate. Because the college readiness gap is such a complex problem, it may be that the real issue is the low ratio of advocates or counselors to students than having a specific model. However, without consistent communication between HTC and the school districts the advocates serve, measurable outcomes are impossible.

A glaring weakness in the program (as in similar programs around the country) is that the focus is primarily on motivating these students to finish high school. Too often “college readiness” is defined by placement test scores and whether or not students need developmental coursework, based on the results of the placement tests, in areas such as reading, English, mathematics, or ESOL before taking college-level courses. Because those exams do not require college-level academic skills to pass, there is indeed an often glaring gap between the academic skills necessary to graduate from high school and those necessary to take college-level courses; HTC’s program does help students identify that gap early enough to motivate and assist students in closing the gap before high school graduation.

While this is a start, the members of Team 9 agree that graduation from high school does not equate to readiness for college. Students also need maturity, motivation, personal responsibility, clear and attainable goals, the ability to self-advocate, and other “soft skills” not measured by tools like the Accuplacer, and often not covered in a high school curriculum mandated to prepare students to pass standardized exams in order to graduate. As we at the

colleges see with many PSEO students, having the academic skills requisite for success in college courses does not mean those students are mature or motivated enough to be successful in college. We acknowledge there is often a gap in the academic skills required to be successful in high school and those required to be successful in college, but it appears that the biggest gap between high school and college is in the expectations of these soft skills that are essential to college but not to high school to anywhere near the same degree. The lack of a reliable assessment tool for these skills is a major problem. Most such tools cover “work readiness,” and while most agree that work-readiness soft skills are also relevant to college success, they are not exactly identical.

One possible way to address the lack of “college-readiness” soft skills of prospective college students is the systematic identification of these skills, which would be addressed with a pre-college class or set of workshops at the College Readiness high schools. First, Readiness Advocates would work with college faculty and staff to identify a set of soft-skills they determine are important to college admission, persistence, and success. Second, Readiness Advocates would find and use a tool to measure these soft-skills. Third, Readiness Advocates would work with college faculty to build a curriculum that promotes the development and strengthening of these important soft-skills. Next, the College would create a set of workshops or classes to deliver the new curriculum. And, finally, the College would establish a set of measures to determine the outcomes of the new curriculum. The curriculum could then be adjusted as the data helps identify what is and is not working for the students. Because academic skills are an essential aspect of college readiness, the program would be greatly enhanced by academic tutors as well, even if it was just for one day a week on the high school campus.

A site visit to Robbinsdale Cooper High School by two Luoma Action Team 9 members, Andrew and Bill, identified leadership as a key ingredient to program success. The leadership role played by the Cooper principal, Michael Favor, included giving HTC staff access to both students and data. Leadership by Lisa Larson, at HTC, included establishing a strong, ongoing presence at the high school. HTC staff members were able to build strong personal relationships with school leaders, as well as students, and were asked to meet with each student during the school year. Visiting the school multiple times each week meant that the students knew HTC staff would be available for follow-up meetings and to help answer students' questions in a timely fashion. According to information gathered at HTC Luoma Action team meetings, this leadership and follow-up was not the case at all of the high schools that are currently part of the HTC College Readiness network. All considered, strong and engaged high school leadership, coupled with college staff availability, seem to be closely tied to the success of the HTC College Readiness program as it exists at Cooper High School. The relationship between Hennepin Tech and Robbinsdale Cooper High School might serve as a model for future adoption and expansion of the current College Readiness Advocate program. While it is recognized that each high school and college operate differently, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining a set of basic expectations on the part of both the college and the high school involved would be helpful. The purpose of this MOU would be to establish a baseline agreement that might outline, for example, what data might be collected by the College or how much access college representatives would have to high school students. Additionally, this MOU could offer a menu of College Readiness services from which a high school can choose, which would also allow the colleges to do cross-school comparisons and determine which services are most requested and, perhaps more importantly, which have the greatest relative success.

Another suggestion that might standardize the College Readiness Advocate program, making it easier to adopt, manage, and measure, would be an annual report from Hennepin Tech to the program high schools. The purpose of such a report would be two-fold. First, it would give the College an opportunity to let the high schools know exactly what they are doing at the schools and the kind of impact the program is having. Second, the report would allow for year-to-year comparisons of events, activities, and number of advocate-to-student meetings. The College may already be collecting and reporting much, if not all, of this information as part of one or more of their program-supporting grants. Creating a one-page report with information such as the number of advocate visits, the number of individual students met, and the number of college-bound students who have met with an advocate at some point in their high school career would provide good and useful feedback to the high schools, while creating information upon which future grant opportunities could be pursued. Finally, we believe there is an opportunity to work with marketing professionals to develop a name and logo to brand the College Readiness Program in a way that emphasizes the value of the high-touch Readiness Advocates that have made HTC's college readiness efforts stand out.

Conclusions: Moving Forward

With reductions in Access and Opportunities funding, simply sustaining the program is an immediate problem, and expanding the program to other area high schools is a more ponderous obstacle. Currently, they have to pull together multiple funding sources and manage multiple grant-funded projects. If they were able to document better success measures and better data, the Readiness Advocate program would be better able to convince funders to support these efforts toward improving college readiness. Because of their obvious dedication to student

success, the experience, knowledge, and goodwill generated by the College Readiness Advocate program will only help Hennepin Technical College find creative solutions to funding the program.

One possibility for expansion and future funding is to use the Cooper model as a template for other MnSCU colleges and their partner high schools, with funding partially provided by the System Office. What was most striking about the visit to Cooper was that students knew the advocates who sat in their main commons three days a week. The advocates are not there as recruiters for HTC who only stop in a couple times each year; in fact, although they do have a table wrap with the HTC logo, they turn it around to hide the logo so students do not associate them with the admissions recruiters they are used to ignoring from other schools. Another striking aspect of the visit was how often the students talk about their plans to attend proprietary schools in the area instead of higher quality and lower cost MnSCU schools because those schools have promised to “take care of everything.” Students seem to be persuaded by catchy ads and jingles for those colleges and are easy targets for the high-pressure sales tactics employed by their admissions representatives. As a System, we should focus more on competing with those schools for Minnesota’s students and not with each other. If the System were to coordinate an effort to put Readiness Advocates in schools close to our metro colleges, we would be able to draw students to our colleges and away from those for-profit schools. Branding the program would be a tremendous asset to help identify the purpose of the Readiness Advocates in high schools and our approach to solving this complex problem. With a System-wide approach, MnSCU could set up a tracking system to track all high-school students participating in a MnSCU-sponsored readiness program, enabling MnSCU to track and collect data on students that end up in any of our institutions.

The Readiness Advocate program, by providing a trusted presence in the high schools, would help us meet all three goals of The MnSCU System Office's new Strategic Framework: helping to increase access to the extraordinary education we provide, becoming the partner of choice to meet Minnesota's community and workforce needs, and continuing to offer the highest value/most affordable option for higher education in the state. In order to become the "partner of choice" in Minnesota, securing funding to continue and scale up this partnership at other schools, especially in the Metropolitan area, is imperative. Hennepin Technical College has developed an excellent program through which we could all benefit in the MnSCU system.

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