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Implementation of the "Collaborating on Economic Success in Appalachia" High School-Higher Education Alignment Project

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IMPORTANCE

This case study documents the implementation of the Collaborating on Economic Success in Appalachia (COESA) partnership, a consortium of 18 school districts, three higher education institutions, and five partner organizations distributed across four counties in the Appalachian region of Ohio. The partnership's primary goal is to reduce the percentage of students required to take remedial coursework when they enter higher education. They are tackling this goal primarily through better alignment of high school and college curriculum, especially in English and mathematics, and the development of networks of high school and college faculty.

Curricular misalignment and the lack of inter-organizational relationships among K-12 and higher education systems has been a longstanding issue in the United States. This misalignment is consequential because we know that college graduation rates are significantly lower for students who take any remedial coursework their freshman year of college (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009). Of late, however post-secondary access and success, the costs of these two- and four-year degrees, and the implications of a dwindling pool of skilled graduates entering the regional workforce have become significant economic development issues. Appalachian Ohio communities, plagued by historically low college going rates, higher unemployment, and higher poverty rates than the rest of the state, are focusing on education and workforce development as the key to economic transformation. Figuring out how to help more students enroll and find success in postsecondary education, many who are still the first in their families to attend college, is critical to these communities.

BACKGROUND

A 2010 study conducted by the Ohio Board of Regents indicated that about 42 % of all Ohio freshmen enrolled full-time in a public college or university directly from high school end up taking some remedial coursework in English or mathematics (Ohio Board of Regents, 2011). In an attempt to address this policy problem, the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents developed a statewide Race to the Top high school-higher education alignment initiative which led to the forging of fourteen partnerships among high school, higher education, technical and supporting institutions in the state of Ohio. Alignment will help ensure that (a) more students leave high school prepared to succeed in college and careers; (b) more students graduate from high school having earned postsecondary credit; (c) more adult learners transition successfully from ABE/GED programs to postsecondary education; and (d) the need for remedial education courses at colleges and universities is reduced (Complete College Ohio Task Force: Report & Recommendations, 2011).

The COESA partnership represents a unique case across the 14 funded consortia in the state of Ohio. It can be considered a single experiment under unique conditions (e.g. historically low college going and educational attainment rates) and meeting all of the conditions for examining the success of the high school-higher education alignment projects. The study also provides an "inside the black box" view on rather rare processes of collaboration among high schools and higher education institutions by analyzing the





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successes and challenges of the high school-higher education alignment. Case study findings will provide practical recommendations for enhancing collaboration efforts among high schools and higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Because the COESA is a single case among 14 funded high school-higher education alignment consortia across Ohio, albeit comprised of 18 individual subunits of implementation (the 18 participating high schools), a single-case design with multiple, embedded units of analysis will be deployed. Data collected at four exemplar districts complement available school level data from the 18 participating LEAs by providing a “thick” description of implementation of the project components and initial outcomes (e.g. student selection of rigorous coursework, dual enrollment, blended learning, college enrollment).

DATA

Researchers have completed document reviews, meeting observations, and interviews with the project lead and high school teachers. We are in the process of conducting interviews with the higher education faculty who have been involved to date. We will be interviewing high school principals and college administrators late Spring 2013. Eleventh graders in the four intensive case study districts will be surveyed in early May 2013.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The consortium was funded for implementation in the fall of 2012 by completing action plans for alignment in English and math. The action plans identified areas of focus, such as the lack of common data gathering frameworks across the three higher education institutions making it difficult to even establish baseline data for metrics. The action plans also indicated that there are currently no common dual enrollment courses universally available among the consortium participants, and dual enrollment policies are uneven among the three higher education institutions.

At this early stage of project implementation, engagement of high school teachers and higher education faculty is uneven. However, several LEAs in the collaborative are already implementing innovations in dual enrollment, flipped classrooms, and common course syllabi across districts. Some high school teachers are meeting with faculty (face-to-face and via quarterly webinars) to discuss course content and alignment in math, English, and science. One of the first collaboration efforts brought together high school and college math instructors to develop a senior mathematics course that is more closely aligned to college freshman math requirements. Some teachers are also planning to pilot an Advanced Placement Calculus course that uses blended dual enrollment.

A few teachers we spoke with have already been working to align course content in math, English, and science using informal connections with college faculty (e.g. they are friends, former students). On one of the science webinars, Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) faculty conducted a lab based on high school teacher requests for new ways to present specific content. Blended learning options are not viable across all participating LEAs at this time because of technology barriers.

Early-stage research indicates increased collaboration among some teachers and IHE faculty in the collaborative and an opportunity for both innovative practices and longer-term practitioner networks to emerge. Technology issues and time for collaboration and course delivery are barriers for some of the participating LEAs.

Suggested Citation

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