

GAPS BETWEEN SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION AS PERCEIVED BY SOUTH TEXAS SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS*

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Abstract

Investigated in the current study were gaps between secondary schools and higher education in English curriculum and in general areas, as perceived by South Texas secondary school English teachers. Qualitative analysis yielded seven themes concerning the gaps and six themes concerning suggested initiatives and services. Findings from the study confirmed previous studies in which researchers have advocated for more collaboration and curriculum alignment between the two levels of institutions. In addition, practical issues and challenges facing secondary school teachers such as teaching to the test, students' motivation issues, time constraints, and funding issues were raised. By incorporating concerns raised by secondary school teachers, educational leaders can make informed decisions about how to improve high school graduates' college readiness.



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1 Introduction

Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, and Venezia (2006) reported that 40% of students at four-year universities and 63% of students at two-year colleges had to take remediation courses when they got to college. The *No Child Left Behind* Act (2001) also pointed out that “nearly a third of our college freshmen” had to take a remedial course before they could take regular college level courses (p. 1). Worse still, many students once in college were not successfully completing college courses, and many college professors perceived entering freshmen as not ready (Callan et al., 2006). Olson (2006) painted an even grimmer picture when he mentioned that only 22% of ACT test takers scored at levels associated with college success in English, math, and science, and only 13% of college professors told researchers that their students were ‘very well’ prepared for college work. Greene and Winters (2005) calculated the college readiness rates by using a combination of high school graduation rates, required courses’ completion rates, and NAEP reading pass rates. Results were that about 40% of White students, 23% of African-American students, and 20% of Hispanic students qualified for being considered “college-ready” in 2002.

As of now, college readiness has become a national concern. Among the researchers who examined the gaps between the two levels of the institutions, few of them had investigated the perceptions of teachers from the secondary schools. These teachers have the first-hand experience preparing students for college, so their opinions and observations are crucial in helping policy makers understand the causes for the lack of college readiness so as to seek effective solutions.

More and more scholars have attributed the problem of lacking college readiness to the lack of collaboration between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions. Conley (2005) believed that high school students were not acquiring college readiness skills due to the lack of alignment in curriculum and instruction between high schools and colleges. Though **high school curriculum** is mostly concerned with getting students through the course, covering the course materials, giving tests, and expecting “right-or-wrong” answers, college curriculum requires students to think critically and analytically. As a result, high school graduates get lost in college classrooms, or worse still, many of them can not pass the entrance examination to enter college level courses. Callan et al. (2006) also concurred with Conley’s observation and argued that high school coursework did not build skills for college readiness and that high school teachers had different expectations for students than college professors’ expectations. For example, 67% of the high school teachers did not think that grammar skills were important writing skills, whereas college professors viewed correct writing as important. In addition, high school teachers were not informed about college course expectations, or assessment and placement policies (Callan et al., 2006).

To remedy the problems and to prepare students for college readiness, Callan et al. (2006) called for collaboration between the two levels of institutions, aligning curriculum and assessment standards. Various initiatives have been carried out by local educational agencies and individual practitioners of education. For example, Meserve and Formwalt (1980) worked towards building partnership between history teachers in high school and history professors in college. Gilbert (2000) reported on a summer academy developed by the joint efforts from a local university, the high school, and the tribal community to provide academic support services and culturally appropriate instruction to American Indian students.

College Board Office of Academic Initiatives and Test Development (n.d.) has emphasized the collaboration between the two levels of institutions by offering quality AP courses and dual-enrollment courses. Universities such as San Diego State University have initiated early assessment program to assess students’ college readiness early in 11th grade and identify deficiencies. Then these deficiencies would be addressed in 12th grade so that students could become college ready once they finished 12th grade. Center for Educational Partnerships (n.d.) reported on some college readiness programs inviting selected groups of 11th grade students to participate in the programs during weekends, during which skills’ training and college information workshops were provided by college professors and staff.

Some statewide initiatives also began to emerge. The state of Texas has encouraged schools to require students to fulfill coursework on recommended graduation plan rather than minimal requirement graduation plan (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). State Higher Education Executive Officers (n.d.) examined some universities’ college readiness initiatives and proposed that there should be statewide K-16 systems so that states

can treat education as an integrated system from birth through post-secondary schools. More specifically, such a system should include five major components: (a) early outreach; (b) curriculum and assessment systems; (c) high quality teaching; (d) student financial aid; and (e) data and accountability systems.

2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the gaps between secondary schools and higher education in English curriculum and in general areas, as perceived by the secondary school English teachers in South Texas. Suggestions about initiatives to bridge the gaps were also invited. Findings from the study may provide educational leaders with perspectives from teachers who have first-hand knowledge about students and about the challenges of preparing students for college. Consequently, educational leaders may be able to make informed decisions about necessary initiatives to implement to improve students' college readiness.

3 Research Questions

The researchers addressed the following two questions:

1. What are the perceived gaps between secondary education and higher education, especially in the area of English curriculum?
2. What initiatives or support services should be in place to bridge the gaps?

4 Method

Approvals were obtained from school administrators to conduct presentations on college readiness and to administer a survey on teachers' perceived gaps. The presentation included the comparison and contrast between college English and high school English curricula. In addition, the standardized tests on Reading and Writing for high school students and college placement were also presented. Following the presentation, a survey that contained four Likert scale satisfaction items and three open-ended questions was administered, and the respondents' informed consents were obtained.

For the purpose of the current study, qualitative analysis was applied to the participants' responses to two of the open-ended questions, namely,

- (1) What gaps do you perceive between secondary education and higher education, especially in the area of English curriculum?
- (2) What initiatives do you think the two levels of institutions should undertake to bridge the gaps?

Themes concerning the perceived gaps and the initiatives to bridge the gap were derived. These themes were then quantitized to show which themes were mentioned more often than others.

5 Results

A total of 70 secondary school English teachers from four school districts in South Texas responded to the survey questions. Qualitative analysis of the two open-ended questions yielded seven themes for the perceived gaps and six themes for the suggested initiatives to bridge the gaps. From the most frequently mentioned themes to the least frequently mentioned ones, the seven themes about perceived gaps included secondary schools' (a) too much emphasis on standardized testing, (b) lack of rigor in curriculum and instruction, (c) insufficient focus on critical thinking, analytical thinking, and research skills, (d) insufficient practice on writing and sentence skills, (e) problems with students' motivation, work ethics, and maturity level, (f) lack of qualified teachers, and (g) heavy work load and big class size (See Table 1). Descriptors of these themes are presented in Table 2.

Themes	Number of Times Themes Present	Percentage of Times Themes Present
Too much emphasis on standardized testing	29	41%
Lack of rigor in curriculum and instruction	16	23%
Insufficient focus on critical thinking, analytical thinking, and research skills	12	17%
Insufficient practice on writing and sentence skills	6	9%
Problems with students' motivation, work ethics, and maturity level	5	7%
Lack of qualified teachers	2	3%
Heavy work load and big class size	2	3%

Table 1: Frequency of Themes about Gaps between Two Levels of Institutions

Themes	Descriptors
Too much emphasis on standardized testing	Curriculum and instruction driven by TAKS, not by deep learning.
Lack of rigor in curriculum and instruction	Instruction lacking in depth of analysis, disparity of standards, lack of time to finish curriculum, pressure to pass students.
Insufficient focus on critical thinking, analytical thinking, and research skills	Not enough time spent on teaching research skills, lack of training in analytical thinking, or critical thinking.
Insufficient practice on writing and sentence skills	Language Arts instruction not emphasizing grammar, not providing enough writing practice.
Problems with students' motivation, work ethics, and maturity level	Students not engaged in active learning, lack maturity, not motivated, not industrious.
Lack of qualified teachers	Some teachers lack credentials or qualifications to teach the subjects.
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Heavy work load and big class size	Teachers teaching too many students, too many hours, suffering from burn out.
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Table 2: Descriptors for Themes about the Gaps between the Two Levels of Institutions

The six themes concerning the initiatives to bridge the gaps consisted of (a) having teachers from both levels of institutions to collaborate more on sharing teaching strategies, (b) promoting awareness of college culture and entrance standards to secondary students, administrators, and parents, (c) vertically aligning curricular expectations and testing standards, (d) providing time for the collaboration activities, (e) encouraging more AP, Pre-AP, College Preparation, and dual enrollment courses, and (f) securing funding and more systematic planning for the collaboration at the district level (See Table 3). Descriptors of these themes are presented in Table 4.

Themes	Number of Times Themes Present	Percentage of Times Themes Present
Teachers from both levels of institutions collaborating more on sharing teaching strategies	28	40%
To promote awareness of college culture and entrance standards to secondary students, administrators, and parents	25	36%
To vertically align curricular expectations and testing standards	24	34%
To provide time for the collaborative activities	9	13%
To encourage more AP, Pre-AP, College Preparation, and dual enrollment courses	7	10%
To secure funding and start systematic planning for the collaboration at the district level	2	3%

Table 3: Frequency of Themes about Suggested Initiatives

Themes	Descriptors
Teachers from both levels of institutions collaborating more on sharing teaching strategies	Teachers from the two levels of institutions should communicate more, should have liaisons, should dialogue more, college professors should visit high school classrooms, team teach with high school teachers, should serve as guest speakers, should perform sample teaching, should establish study labs.
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To promote awareness of college culture and entrance standards to secondary students, administrators, and parents	Use Web-CT or Video to educate secondary school administrators, parents, students about the college curriculum and instruction, placement tests, and placement standards.
To vertically align curricular expectations and testing standards	Vertical alignment of secondary school curriculum with college curriculum and college expectations for students. Align TAKS and Accuplacer standards.
To provide time for the collaborative activities	Deal with logistical issues, such as time constraint, schedules.
To encourage more AP, Pre-AP, College Preparation, and dual enrollment courses	Offer more AP classes, or Pre-AP classes. Offer College preparation classes, and dual enrollment classes.
To secure funding and start systematic planning for the collaboration at the district level	Need designated funding support, need systematic planning at the school district level.

Table 4: Descriptors for Themes about Suggested Initiatives to Bridge the Gaps

6 Discussion

Findings about the perceived gaps corroborate previous studies about the gaps. The theme of “Insufficient Focus on Critical Thinking, Analytical Thinking, and Research Skills” supports Conley’s (2005) finding that secondary school teachers focused more on covering the materials than training students on the critical thinking skills. The theme of “Insufficient Practice on Writing and Sentence Skills” concurs with Callan’s and his co-authors’ (2006) report that high school English teachers did not value grammar skills as much as the college professors.

Some of the participants’ suggested initiatives also concur with the existing initiatives, such as emphasizing AP courses and dual enrollment courses (College Board Office of Academic Initiatives and Test Development, n.d.) and promoting college awareness (Center for Educational Partnerships, n.d.). However, previous researchers have not mentioned some practical issues and dilemmas facing the secondary teachers, as uncovered in this study. These issues include the pressure to teach for the standardized testing, the pressure to pass students and thus lowering the standards, and problems with students’ motivation and work ethics.

Participants in this current study also raised questions about the logistics of collaboration between faculty at both levels of institutions, such as time constraint and funding issues. Participants also called for systematic approach at school district level in order to make things happen. What stands out from this current study is the discovering of practical issues and challenges that we have to deal with if we want to implement bridging the gap initiatives. By listening to the voices of the secondary school teachers, educational leaders and policy designers can target relevant and pertinent issues and mobilize resources to address these issues. Colleges that collaborate with secondary schools should focus on promoting college awareness and teaching exchange or team teaching. On the other hand, secondary schools should incorporate college awareness into their existing curriculum in addition to switching the focus from teaching to the tests to teaching critical and analytical thinking skills.

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