

Achieving College Readiness through a Dual Enrollment Course: “Strategies for Success”

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Abstract

To increase equitable postsecondary access and success outcomes it is critical to address the college preparedness gap. While Florida International University (FIU) continues to improve retention and graduation gaps for currently enrolled students, it became evident that the university could play a larger role in preparing high school students for college and university. In 2017, FIU developed a dual enrollment version of a currently offered course, *SLS1510: Strategies for Success*, to address this gap. The purpose of this article is to describe the context in which this decision occurred, the philosophy used to drive development of the course, and the steps taken to pilot the course. This article highlights the successes of the course, including enrollment of over 2,000 students over 4 semesters, along with areas of improvement for future iterations. The findings of the pilot can help to inform colleges and universities who are interested in addressing college preparedness in the k-12 pipeline.

Keywords: preparedness; non-cognitive; k-12; access; self-awareness

Introduction

The college-readiness gap among incoming students, especially low-income and underrepresented students, is well documented (Conley, 2007; Roderick, Nagaota, & Coca, 2009; Ross, et al., 2012). Literature indicates that in addition to traditional measures of college readiness (e.g. GPA, SAT/ACT scores), there are a number of non-academic, traditionally referred to as non-cognitive, characteristics (e.g. time management, study skills, and motivation) that help ensure a student is ready to succeed in college once admitted (Conley, 2007; Mattern, et al., 2014).

While Florida International University (FIU) takes a holistic approach to college readiness efforts with its k-12 partners, the purpose of this article is to describe how FIU addresses the non-academic college readiness gap through a high school dual enrollment course, *Strategies for Success*.

The authors first present a brief history of the student success work that took place at FIU to establish the context for addressing college readiness through dual enrollment. An overview follows of the theoretical framework used to develop the course and a discussion about the selection of dual enrollment as a vehicle for increasing college readiness. The paper ends with a survey of key curricular points, lessons learned, and future directions for the program.

History and Context

Florida International University (FIU) is a large research university located in Miami, FL. Home to over 57,000 diverse students, many of whom enter the university from the surrounding three counties; FIU has the unique opportunity to support the local community and economy through its delivery of high-quality education to these students.

In 2015, FIU invested in the creation of the Student Success Initiatives (SSI) office, committed to developing retention and graduation interventions. The context for this article lies in two of the interventions developed by this office: College Life Coaching (CLC) and SLS1510: Strategies for Success. Several institutions across the country have used one or both of these interventions to improve retention and graduation rates (see: Florida State University, Tulane University); and FIU adapted these models to address the specific needs of our students.

The CLC program functioned initially as a targeted, reactive intervention. The SSI team would identify freshman students on academic warning or probation and invite them to participate in the program. The coaching program focuses on five core areas: time management skills; study habits and learning strategies; ability to identify and create goals; coping strategies; critical thinking skills; and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. FIU piloted the program in summer 2016 (15 students) and launched to a larger cohort of students in fall 2016 (46 students).

While the CLC program experienced success, the FIU team was not able to scale to the number of students needed due to limited staffing. Because of this challenge, *Strategies for Success* was developed. Much like the growth of academic/life coaching in the higher education landscape; student success courses are common at all levels of post-secondary institutions and have been demonstrated to improve persistence (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno, 2007). The goal of this course at FIU is to incorporate coaching in the classroom through training instructors in coaching skills combined with a standardized curriculum. With this new model, the team has served 907 students since spring 2017.

Due to the large number of FIU students requiring this course in their spring semester, the SSI team recognized that many of the conversations that instructors and students were having during class and related coaching appointments had to do with lack of preparation and/or knowledge before they entered FIU. It was at this time that the SSI team began to have conversations with the dual enrollment office to explore offering this course at the high school level.

Dual enrollment in the state of Florida is guided by §1007.271. Students are eligible to take dual enrollment courses beginning in 6th grade, provided that they have “a 3.0 unweighted high school grade point average and the minimum score on a common placement test adopted by the State Board of Education which indicates that the student is ready for college-level coursework” (Dual Enrollment Programs, 2018). The statute also outlines requirements for faculty credentialing and course content. Briefly, these must be equivalent to those of the post-secondary institution issuing the credit. FIU drafts articulation agreements for each county that is engaged in the dual enrollment program to ensure adherence to the robust regulatory environment within Florida.

The FIU Dual Enrollment program serves, on average, over 5,000 students per semester. The research on dual enrollment indicates that students who have previously earned dual enrollment credits demonstrate higher GPA and completion rates once they enter a postsecondary institution (Jones, 2012; Radunzel, Nobel, & Wheeler, 2012). Students in the FIU dual enrollment program, who enroll at FIU, show results consistent with this research. They are more likely to persist to their 2nd year, maintain higher GPAs, and have 4- and 6- year graduation rates higher than students who did not enter with dual enrollment credits. Furthermore, the admissions yield rate for students with dual enrollment credit is over twenty percent higher. This data demonstrates why FIU has pursued dual enrollment and seeks to build affinity with enrolled students so that they come to FIU and can succeed in graduating with a 4-year degree to further their academic and career goals.

Theoretical Framework and Operationalization

A myriad of personal, societal, and institutional forces influence post-secondary success. In general, the literature indicates that at a personal level, both academic (traditionally described as cognitive) and non-academic (traditionally described as non-cognitive) skills are of critical importance (Conley, 2008; Farrington et al., 2012; Komaraju, Ramsey, & Rinella, 2013). Development of non-academic factors happens well before the transition to college, and occurs primarily outside of the classroom (Farrington et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2016). Therefore, it becomes even more imperative to review these skills overtly with students, especially those who may be more at-risk of not completing their degree. In fact, much attention over the past 5 years has focused on the “hidden curriculum.” Smith (2013) calls this “a set of unwritten norms, values, and expectations that unofficially governs how individuals interact with and evaluate one another” (p. 47). Addressing these issues through interventions such as success coaching or success courses is based on literature demonstrating that these non-academic factors can in fact be influenced and changed (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno, 2007).

The initial development of *Strategies for Success* drew heavily from the conceptual framework presented in figure 1, developed by Conley (2008). Conley posits that college readiness is comprised of four factors: key cognitive strategies, key content, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. In regards to specific types of non-academic factors, Farrington et al. (2012) found that the literature identifies five areas of importance: (a) academic behaviors; (b) academic perseverance; (c) academic mindsets; (d) learning strategies; and (e) social skills. These are subsets of what Conley defined as academic behavior and contextual skills and awareness.

While recognizing that many students may come to college ill-prepared in all four domains, FIU sought to design the *Strategies for Success* course and coaching interventions for developing only two, academic behaviors and contextual skills and awareness. Conley (2007) defines academic behaviors as “a range of behaviors that reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control of a series of processes and behaviors necessary for academic success” (p.16). Contextual skills and awareness signifies “the privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture” (p.17).

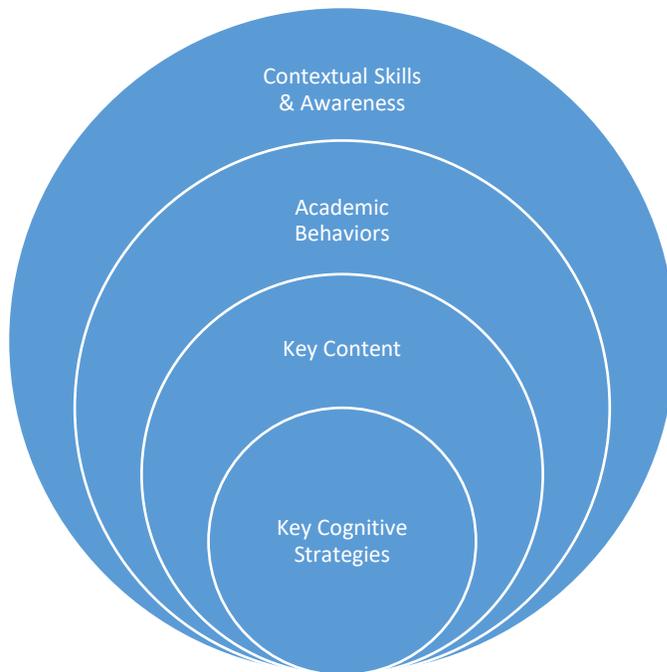


Figure 1. Facets of College Readiness. From Conley, D. T. (2008).

SSI staff chose to focus on these two elements given the results of our CLC pilot and the fact that many of our students do not come to FIU with the social and cultural capital needed to navigate a university campus. The staff selected the academic behaviors in the course to include topics such as time management, study skills/test preparation, motivation, and social and emotional intelligence. Next, the staff operationalized contextual skills and awareness through topics such as academic and career planning and financial literacy. Please see Table 1 for more detail.

Table 1. *FIU Strategies for Success Course Objectives*

Strategies for Success Modules	Connection to Facets of College Readiness (Conley, 2008)
Goal Setting	Academic Behaviors
Mindset Matters	Academic Behaviors
Time Management	Academic Behaviors
Learning How to Learn	Academic Behaviors
Study Prep	Academic Behaviors
Roadblocks and Problem Solving	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Resources and Getting Involved	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Wellness	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Self-Evaluation	Academic Behaviors
Aligning Your Values, Skills, and Goals	Academic Behaviors
Is Your Major Right for You?	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Career Exploration	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Financial Aid and Financial Literacy	Contextual Skills and Awareness
Final Reflection and Forward Thinking	Academic Behaviors

Implementing SLS 1510 as a Dual Enrollment Course

Once planners determined that *Strategies for Success* should be pilot tested in a high-school setting, they made several important adjustments. The course offered to FIU students is one credit only, to avoid excess credit accumulation. However, it was necessary to offer the course in a variable credit format—up to three credits—so that it could be included as part of the dual enrollment program. This presented several benefits. First, coverage of critical strategies related to time management, studying, and test preparation could be more in-depth. Furthermore, the SSI team integrated sections on social and emotional intelligence and additional material on how to navigate college. Adding these elements served to increase the coverage of the “hidden curriculum” through discussions about how to navigate systems such as financial aid and how to gain “the knowledge and skills that enable them to interact with a diverse cross-section of academicians and peers” (Conley, 2008, p. 11).

Moreover, adding this course to the dual enrollment portfolio helps to establish dual enrollment credit at more high schools throughout the county and allow for more students to enroll who otherwise may not be prepared for content-specific dual enrollment courses. In fact, since its inception in fall 2017, over two thousand students have taken SLS1510 as a high school course at twenty-six different high schools through a specialized summer course on FIU’s campus, and online. In fall 2018, 815 high school students enrolled in the course, accounting for nearly 14% of dual enrolled enrollments. This is our highest enrollment thus far. In addition, the course serves a diverse demographic – roughly twenty percent of students who have taken the course identify as black or African-American while 73% identify as Hispanic or Latino; exceeding the proportion of these students currently enrolled at FIU (13% and 61% respectively). Recognizing the importance that early preparation can have on postsecondary access and success, FIU intends to leverage SLS1510 as a tool for increasing equitable access to FIU.

In addition to high enrollment numbers, persistence data for students who successfully transition to FIU is encouraging. Thus far, 78 students transitioned into the FIU freshman cohort during the 2018-19 academic year. Of those, 99% (77) persisted into the spring semester. While this persistence rate is higher than the university average for fall to spring persistence, as larger numbers of students make a transition to FIU, we will be able to look closer at whether or not this course significantly influences retention and graduation rates.

Key Curricular Points

Several key design elements ensure students receive the same content regardless of location. These elements include instructor training and support, a master class format, a commitment to the course philosophy, and active learning.

Instructor Training and Support

Dual Enrollment instructors must meet the minimum requirements for an adjunct faculty appointment at FIU, which is at least a Master’s degree with 18 hours of focus in the disciplinary area. Since *Strategies for Success* is a general studies course, instructors must have a Master’s degree and be identified by their principal as having a capacity to succeed in teaching a college-level class. A benefit that this course offers is that it has engaged school guidance counselors in

the teaching process, which leverages their expertise in the classroom. Once selected, dual enrollment instructors complete the FIU credentialing process and attend a required instructor training. This training introduces them to the master class template and overall philosophy of the course. In addition to these trainings, FIU mentors visit each high school instructor at least once per semester. This gives an opportunity for high school instructors to ask questions or address any challenges they may have experienced; it also gives the FIU mentor an opportunity to see how instructors put the curriculum into operation in the classroom. Instructors also have access to a SharePoint website, updated through the semester. This site includes updates from the FIU mentor as well as any shared best practices that instructors have found to be helpful.

Master Class Format

The master class format for this course includes a standardized syllabus. The course structure consists of four modules and four required projects. Module 1 highlights the importance of mindset, goal setting, and time management. The project for this module is a Mindset Reflection paper where students reflect on how to develop a growth mindset and why this is critical for college success. The second module focuses on how we learn, study habits, test preparation, and the development of critical thinking. For their second module project, students must develop a presentation of study “best practices” rooted in the science of learning. The third module encompasses what many refer to as “life skills”, including chapters on social and emotional intelligence, diversity and cultural competency, and financial literacy. For this project, students reflect on their personality type: how it shapes their choices in life, academics, and future careers. The final module revolves around academic and career planning. Students reflect on their values and interests to guide them in creating plans for success after high school. Their final project is a career and budget report, where they research their selected career and develop a budget based on projected earnings. The course provides instructors with rubrics for each assignment, which ensures that assessment of artifacts is consistent across all sections.

Commitment to Course Philosophy

The entire curriculum related to the course centers on development of self-awareness through reflection. Students are required to keep a journal (either written or electronic) to address key reflection questions for each reading. The purpose of the reflective assignments are two-fold. First, the process of reflection helps students develop self-awareness, which is critical to both college and lifelong success. Second, it serves to facilitate classroom discussion more effectively.

Active Learning

The final design element critical to facilitation of the course is a commitment to active learning. FIU mentors provide instructors with lesson plans guided by the reflections that students complete each night. The premise of the course is that there should be limited lecturing, with a greater focus on discussion and facilitated group work.

Considerations for Adopting Strategies for Success

While additional data must accrue and give a clearer picture as high school students continue to graduate, the initial feedback from high school instructors and students alike demonstrate that this course can be helpful in exposing students to critical non-academic factors important to their post-secondary success. To pilot this course, institutions must consider the following: state-level dual enrollment policy, transferability of course, human resources, and financial resources.

State-Level Dual Enrollment Policy

Not all states offer the same flexible dual enrollment policies as Florida. According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS) (Dounay Zinth, 2016), several states have no statewide dual enrollment policy. For those that do, stipulations vary on who is responsible for paying tuition, where courses may be offered, or how courses are evaluated, among other rules and regulations that must be complied with.

Course Transferability

FIU allows *Strategies for Success* to count as transfer credit towards a student's degree program. In addition to this course, FIU takes care in offering courses that count towards university core-curriculum requirements. This helps ensure that students are able to decrease their time to degree once enrolling in a post-secondary institution. Florida's statewide articulation agreements also provide assurance that students who wish to attend other institutions within the state can receive credit for their FIU dual enrollment.

Human and Financial Resources

FIU has invested in the Dual Enrollment program based on the overall success that students have once they enroll in FIU. FIU currently has eight staff that serve the central dual enrollment office, responsible for overseeing agreements and administrative functions for the program. Each course must have specified a faculty mentor(s). These mentors must have specified credentials to teach the course at FIU, provide training to high school instructors, and conduct site visits to each high school. They must ensure that syllabi, teaching methods, and assignments meet college-level standards. Institutions looking to pilot a dual enrollment program must determine the appropriate method of paying the mentors depending on how they receive payment for offering the dual enrollment courses.

Lessons Learned

While *Strategies for Success* has only just begun its fourth semester, the FIU team has already made changes to the textbook and course. The original version of the course depended on the instructor to develop reflective activities and discussion prompts. Based on feedback, the 2018 version of the course incorporated an edited textbook and specific lesson plans that aligned the reflective activities to classroom discussions. In addition, the course scaled back the number of required projects from eight to four. This provided high school teachers with a framework to

meet all necessary milestones, and adapt the course to fit their teaching style and address the varying needs of students.

The most important lesson learned over the past year, however, is of *structured flexibility*. From the university perspective, this course serves as a foundation for students to build upon. The structure of a master class is necessary to maintain consistency with student learning outcomes, and ensure that all students receive the same information and complete the same activities to build this foundation. At the same time, the high school environment is unique and FIU must allow high school teachers to exercise best practices in classroom management and engagement. The relationship that exists between the FIU mentors and dual enrollment instructors embodies this concept of structured flexibility; which is the core reason why the course continues to evolve and improve.

As of spring 2019, the course has entered its third design iteration. Project leaders adjusted the instructor materials, to provide enough information to be successful without burdening instructors with too much material. It is important that the course mentor and high school teachers communicate to find the right balance of structure and flexibility, as every high school is unique in its needs. FIU is currently piloting a fully online version of the course using open educational resources (OER), designed to maintain a high-level of student reflection and application of course strategies and skills. The FIU team will evaluate the success of the online course at the end of the term to determine if this is a viable mode of delivery for the content of this course. However, the OER materials will serve for use in the face-to-face sections for high schools to reduce the cost burden to local school districts. Data collection and analysis is also an area for improvement. The course mentor works closely with the central dual enrollment office to ensure that appropriate data points are collected; furthermore, the course mentor is exploring how to collect data from high school students taking the course to determine changes in behaviors and attitudes.

Conclusion

As FIU looks to the future, it becomes increasingly clear that universities must proactively address college readiness gaps that occur long before a student applies for admission. At a time when performance-based funding is placing increasing pressure on institutions to adopt policies that may decrease equity, programs such as these can work proactively to ensure that we provide students from all backgrounds with the opportunity to gain skills that translate into academic and career success. This article outlines an approach to collaborating with the k-12 system and intentionally working with high school students to develop the academic, social, and emotional skills they need to be successful lifelong learners. Not only will interventions such as this move to close this gap, but long-term success can also help to improve equity in terms of access to postsecondary education and completion.

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