

Assessment of the Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative: Year 2 Report

Executive Summary

Christine Mokher, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, CNA Education

Lou Jacobson, Ph.D., Co-Principal Investigator, New Horizons

with

Caitlin Ahearn, Northwestern University

Jen Atkin, CNA Education

Michael Flory, Ph.D., CNA Education

Jennifer Lansing, Northwestern University

Juliana Pearson, CNA Education

James Rosenbaum, Ph.D., Northwestern University

Christopher Sun, CNA Education

December 2014



Acknowledgments

This study was made possible by the collaboration and hard work of many individuals beyond the authors. The study team would like to thank the many administrators, educators, and students who participated. The research team also would like to thank Robert LaLonde and John Hughes for their support in the development of this study, Thomas Geraghty for his review of this report, and Bry Pollack for editing.

Distribution

Distribution unlimited. This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305E120010 to the CNA Corporation. The report represents the best opinion of CNA at the time of issue and does not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Approved by:

December 2014

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stacey E. Jordan'.

Stacey E. Jordan, VP and Director
CNA Education

Executive Summary

The Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI) is a statewide program designed to assess the college readiness of high school students in 11th grade, and for those assessed as not college-ready, to provide instruction in the 12th grade that will lead to their college success. The assessment used is the Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT), which includes math and reading/writing components.

This report describes feedback CNA obtained during the 2013/14 school year about the strengths and weaknesses of the FCCRI and ways to increase its effectiveness, particularly as it relates to improving those 12th grade college readiness and success (CRS) courses.

This feedback was obtained through a survey of 109 CRS course teachers in 89 schools and 33 districts; site visits to six school districts, where we interviewed 24 CRS teachers in 12 schools, 11 high school counselors, and seven district curriculum specialists and observed eight CRS classes; and reviews of essays from 329 CRS course students. We also interviewed a mix of 36 administrators and instructors at six nearby state colleges.

The FCCRI's effectiveness and impediments

- **The FCCRI targets students who too often are given inadequate attention—those who test below college-ready in math and/or in reading/writing but have a chance of catching up during their senior year.** The targeted students fall within distinctly different subgroups, however, with distinctly different educational needs, as described below.
 - Students interested in going to college who are close to but not quite college-ready: The FCCRI is perceived to be most effective at meeting the needs of these students, because they need only small gains in hard and soft skills—skills teachers are best equipped to teach.
 - Students interested in going to college but who are far from college-ready: The FCCRI is perceived to be less effective at meeting the needs of these

students, because it is very challenging to get them college-ready in a single school year.

- Students interested in developing career-related skills: The FCCRI is perceived to be ineffective at meeting the needs of these students, because very little attention is given to developing those particular skills or describing how those skills can be gained at a state college.
- Students disengaged in school: The FCCRI is perceived to be especially ineffective at meeting the needs of these students, because too little attention is given (a) to helping these students see the connections among high school, college, and careers and (b) to giving them the individual attention they need.
- **Lack of student engagement is the primary factor limiting the FCCRI's effectiveness.** Two-thirds of CRS teachers report that lack of engagement is a major problem among non-college-bound students, and half report it is a major problem for college-bound students.

How to increase the FCCRI's effectiveness

- **Placing students with different needs into different sections of the CRS courses** was frequently recommended by teachers as a means to focus lessons on what students in particular subgroups need the most. Importantly, grouping together students with similar needs is a key element of Florida's state college developmental-education (dev-ed) programs. Doing this at the K-12 level, however, can be challenging for many reasons, especially in small high schools where there are few CRS sections. But in every class there will be some differences across students, and attention should be given to developing ways to individualize instruction.
- **Improving students' understanding of the connections among high school, college, and careers** was frequently cited by students as a key element of increasing engagement; it is also a strategy recognized in the research literature on college access. This goal could be achieved by:
 - Allotting more class time to developing realistic post-high school plans and less time to test preparation. This could be done by integrating into the curriculum the type of career planning software and counseling we observed in high school Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs and at state college career-counseling centers.

- Increasing interaction between college faculty and students by (a) bringing to high schools many speakers from state colleges and universities to describe the full range of their programs, the preparation needed to complete the programs, and the appealing features of the programs; (b) increasing campus visits by CRS students; and (c) extending dual enrollment to include dev-ed courses.
- **Developing mentoring relationships between students and high school teachers and staff** is a strategy for improving students' college aspirations. It was frequently cited by teachers and students as a desirable step to increase student engagement and help students improve their self-image and belief that they can become college-ready. Indeed, a common student complaint was that no one at their school took the time to talk to them individually about their interests, aspirations, and plans. Personal relationships could be fostered by:
 - Devoting time to counseling students one-on-one or in small groups in conjunction with integrating career and college planning into the curriculum
 - Expanding opportunities for students with a wide range of interests to participate in high school activities that bring them together with faculty outside the classroom, and encouraging participation in those activities.
- **Increasing use of computer-aided instruction and other techniques to assess strengths and weaknesses and to provide individualized instruction to overcome weaknesses** is a promising practice for developmental education. It frequently was cited in interviews with state college faculty as a key means to help college dev-ed students master the material they need to know to become college-ready. While increasing use of computerized systems would probably be effective in high school CRS courses and make more time available to develop students' soft skills and college/career plans, lack of resources is a major impediment to doing this.
- A much more feasible approach would be to **provide more opportunities for CRS teachers to interact with college faculty** to obtain additional materials and identify skills most needed by their students to become college-ready. CRS teachers expressed a strong interest in doing this, as well as in having more opportunities to exchange ideas with fellow teachers.
- **Greater collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary education seems to help smooth post-high school transitions.** A promising way to foster interactions between high school CRS teachers and college dev-ed faculty would be for the colleges to invite both groups to workshops shortly before

the start of each school year to exchange information. The topic would be the most feasible and effective ways to improve CRS lessons through identifying materials and activities that are of interest to high school students, providing practical applications of subject matter needed for success in college and careers, and integrating a variety of class activities such as group work and student presentations.

- Although not directly related to the FCCRI, **giving students access to a much wider range of career-oriented courses** may increase student engagement and career preparation. One way to do this is by giving students the option of attending magnet schools with specialized career and technical programs. The one career and technical education high school we visited had an exceptionally high level of student engagement, to the point where students told us in their essays they worked hard to complete their academic courses so they could take career courses of interest.

Primary and overall conclusions

- **Increasing student engagement is the key to reaching the central goal of the FCCRI**, which is to have more students complete college programs that lead to fulfilling careers.
- **There are promising approaches that should at least be tried out to resolve this difficult and complex problem of lack of student engagement.** Spending more time developing engagement may improve college readiness of CRS students, particularly those who would be the first in their families to attend college.
- One key concern voiced by many teachers and administrators is that only limited progress can be made with the seniors. **Efforts to boost engagement and establish connections among school, college, and careers would be much more effective if started no later than ninth grade.**

Alerting juniors to their college readiness

Most of our year 2 work was directed at increasing the effectiveness of the CRS courses. Nevertheless, alerting juniors that they are not college-ready is an important component of the FCCRI. Some of the feedback we received indicates that even after completing CRS courses, many students are overly optimistic about having the skills needed to complete college work.

One reason why the FCCRI is not more effective at helping students understand the importance of testing college-ready is that many students now are exempt from taking the PERT math exam, due to changes in the eligibility requirements for mandatory PERT testing. Previously, all students took the FCAT math in grade 10, and those scoring a level of 2, 3, or 4 were required to take the PERT math exam in grade 11. However, the state phased out the FCAT math exam and replaced it with End-of-Course (EOC) exams, which students take at the end of math courses such as Algebra I. Now only students taking the Algebra I EOC exam in grade 10 and scoring a level of 2, 3, or 4 on it are required to take the PERT math exam the next year. But most students take Algebra I in grade 9 or prior (i.e., don't take the EOC exam in grade 10), and so are not required to take the PERT math exam as juniors or to enroll in a math CRS course as seniors.

The implications of this change in policy on the number of students being tested are difficult to gauge because students also have the option to take the PERT math exam to obtain a score that can be used to satisfy the Algebra I EOC requirement for high school graduation. This means that many lower-performing students might be taking the PERT math exam for reasons completely independent of the FCCRI.

Our primary concern, however, is not whether the number of students taking the PERT math exam in grade 11 declined; it is whether fewer students who are not college-ready are being assigned to the math CRS courses in grade 12. These courses review critical skills that students will need to pass for-credit math courses in college. Many of these skills are from Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II—courses the high school students may have taken three or four years earlier and need to review.

To offset concerns about over-testing in high school, a reasonable way to assign students to CRS math courses would be to use their most recent math EOC score in grade 11. The exact threshold for placement should be determined by examining the correlation between the EOC scores and PERT scores. This is likely to provide an indicator of college readiness similar to the PERT, while reducing the number of students who need to take the PERT.

In addition, students who believe they are being improperly placed into the math CRS courses could be offered the opportunity to voluntarily take the PERT. If they score college-ready on the PERT, then they could choose to take more-advanced math courses in grade 12. A salutary benefit of making the PERT a route by which students can avoid being assigned to the math CRS courses is that it addresses concerns voiced by some teachers that students do not take the PERT seriously (because they do not understand the implications of scoring below college-ready).

A related suggestion would be to increase flexibility in the CRS course requirement by providing students with low EOC and/or PERT scores in math the option of taking more-advanced math courses in grade 12 in lieu of the CRS courses. This option

should be considered by examining the correlation between pass rates in more-advanced courses with college readiness test scores, and the correlation between performance in more-advanced courses and performance in college-level math courses. Flexibility should be limited to the extent that performance in the more-advanced high school math courses is associated with college readiness and college success.

Finally, the state may want to consider whether to allow students to enroll in career-oriented math courses in lieu of the math CRS courses. The rationale for this suggestion is based on feedback from teachers that some students may benefit more from a course that would help them to see the connections between high school and careers. If this option is considered, students (and parents) would need to receive adequate information and counseling to understand that not taking the math CRS course may substantially reduce the probability of their passing a for-credit math course in college without remediation.

Next steps

Our year 2 feedback indicates that there are many promising practices that can help to make the CRS courses more effective. There are also many individuals with the expertise, knowledge, and willingness to disseminate ideas to increase effectiveness, but not a lot of resources available to organize and disseminate such information.

Thus, CNA plans to use our resources from the federal grant that funds this project to develop and hold regional forums in at least three locations in Florida aimed at providing ideas and materials to increase CRS course effectiveness. To do this, we will create working groups that will enlist the aid of knowledgeable individuals throughout Florida to identify the specific practices and materials that are most likely to achieve that goal. The forums will be developed during the 2014/15 school year and held shortly before school begins, in August 2015.

Each working group will have subcommittees focusing on improving (a) college and career planning to increase student engagement; (b) instructional materials and techniques (separately in math and English/language arts); and (c) collaborations among Florida's high schools, districts, and colleges.

We are actively recruiting volunteers to serve on these working groups. Anyone interested in joining one of these groups can contact Dr. Christine Mokher, Principal Investigator, at mokherc@cna.org.



The CNA Corporation

This report was written by CNA Corporation's Education (EDU) division.

EDU uses applied research, experimental trials, program evaluations, and technical assistance in assessing a broad range of education issues and their real-world implications. EDU operates the Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, which provides technical assistance and research support to educators and policy-makers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.





CNA Corporation is a not-for-profit research organization that serves the public interest by providing in-depth analysis and result-oriented solutions to help government leaders choose the best course of action in setting policy and managing operations.

*Nobody gets closer—
to the people, to the data, to the problem.*