



Significant Discussions

A Guide for Secondary and Postsecondary Curriculum Alignment

Executive Summary

by Laurance J. Warford and Marsha VanNahmen

A well-educated population is critical to the economic vitality and stability of a nation. Educational attainment is critical to our standing in the world. Currently, too few of our nation's young people graduate from high school and successfully transition to higher education. We can no longer be satisfied with the low percentage of young adults with college credentials. This issue is of great concern, so much so that President Obama was motivated to establish the American Graduation Initiative. This initiative calls for a 50 percent increase in student completion rates at community colleges over the next decade. Many private funders and numerous national initiatives like the National Governors Association have also focused resources on increasing student success and completion.

So why are too few young people completing high school and seamlessly transitioning to higher education? Youth who follow all the rules, do well in school, meet state content standards, pass high stakes exams, and complete high school graduation requirements arrive at college and learn that they have deficiencies in reading comprehension, writing, or math skills and thus require remedial or developmental courses before they are prepared for college-level work. Coursework and curriculum between secondary and postsecondary educational levels is disconnected and misaligned. Essentially, these young people graduate under one set of rules then enter college and encounter an entirely new set of expectations.





This misaligned coursework is devastating and expensive. Currently, a majority of students entering community colleges need remedial coursework. One source (Alliance for Excellent Education's *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation* – 2006) estimates that the annual cost to provide remedial education for community college students who have recently completed high school is \$1.4 billion. The cost continues to mount. Students required to take one or more remedial courses are less likely to continue their education and complete a degree or certificate of value than are those students who enter college without the need for remediation. According to National Center for Education Statistics data (2006), just slightly more than half of entering community college freshmen return as sophomores. When students stop-out or drop-out, it increases time to completion, potentially escalates student loan debt, and has a demoralizing impact on confidence and motivation.

The national spotlight on completion goals inspires us to develop or search for ways to make secondary and postsecondary student success the norm. For this reason, the League for Innovation in the Community College, with generous funding support from the MetLife Foundation, led a year-long action research project that has resulted in the *Significant Discussions Guide*—a helpful tool for local educators who are well-positioned to guide a grass roots movement to improve student success by improving student transitions from one education system to another.

Nine community colleges were selected to lead *Significant Discussion* groups. Listed here are the participating community colleges:

- Anne Arundel Community College (MD)
- Central Piedmont Community College (NC)
- Lehigh Carbon Community College (PA)
- Maricopa Community Colleges (AZ)
- Miami Dade College (FL)
- San Diego Community College (CA)
- Southwestern Oregon Community College (OR)
- Sinclair Community College (OH)
- St. Louis Community College (MO)



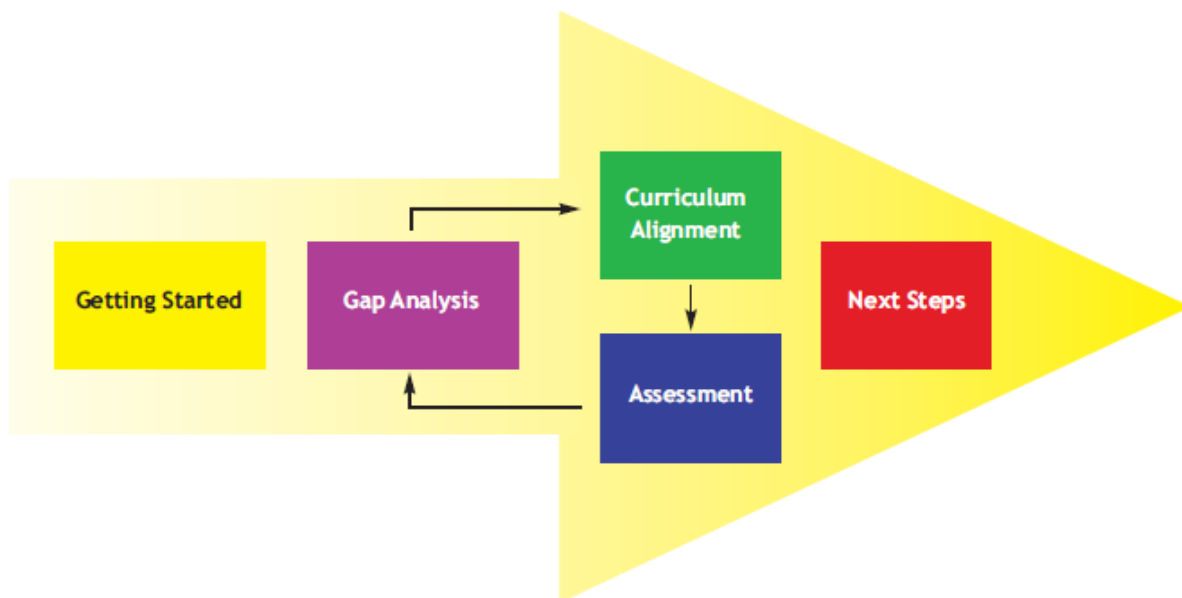


The project was further advised by a national review panel of six prominent professionals with expertise in secondary and postsecondary education.

The resulting publication, titled *Significant Discussions*, is a culmination of the work of discussion groups at these community college sites and promising practices identified through research. More than 150 secondary and postsecondary faculty and administrators along with business and community partners were involved. These collaborative partnerships provided content for the guide and advice on the value of the guide as a useful tool.

The *Significant Discussions Guide* is designed to help local partnerships collaborate to improve curriculum alignment between their secondary and postsecondary education systems, reduce the need for remediation, and improve student success leading to employment opportunities.

This diagram illustrates the major components of the *Significant Discussions Guide*:





Major components of the *Significant Discussions Guide* are described here:

- **Getting Started.** This section offers assistance to identify the right people to bring together for this important work. These collaborative groups must understand the issues and challenges and have the support of high level leaders to establish and achieve goals.
- **Gap Analysis.** During this phase, partners review curriculum to identify when and where (secondary or postsecondary level) the knowledge, skill, or standard is delivered. This process exposes gaps, when critical elements are missed along the instructional continuum.
- **Curriculum Alignment.** Results of the gap analysis are examined in this phase as curriculum is revised to close gaps in knowledge, skills, or standards. Overlaps or duplications are acceptable as long as depth of knowledge becomes more complex and of a higher order of thinking.
- **Assessment.** In this phase, the curriculum is evaluated to determine whether or not the revisions produced the intended outcomes – to close curriculum gaps. Results of this assessment phase will inform subsequent Gap Analyses and Curriculum Alignment work creating a continuous improvement cycle.
- **Next Steps.** This section offers recommendations at a systems level as well as action steps for institutions and individual stakeholders.

To be successful in improving the current conditions, it will take the work of many – from the grass roots instructional level to the policy level. Additionally, it will require that business and industry become more invested in and engaged with educational systems. Accountability across systems cannot be left to volunteer or ad hoc committee work. It will take the time and dedicated efforts of faculty members, curriculum specialists, and community partners. This is hard work that will involve incremental steps over time before noticeable changes will become apparent. *Significant Discussions* provides a context within which to accomplish this work.

None of this can occur without support from the highest-level college and community leadership. This high-level support sends a message that this is important work and justifies the dedication of time and resources.

Significant Discussions describes next steps that must be taken in order for the results of this important work to be realized. Roles are described for both institutions and individuals including faculty members, counselors and advisors, administrators and business and community partners.



To access the *Significant Discussions Guide* go to:
www.league.org/significantdiscussions

In referring to this publication, the following format is recommended:

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Laurance J. Warford is the principal investigator of the Significant Discussions project, and is senior workforce consultant for the League for Innovation in the Community College.

Marsha VanNahmen is the project assistant of the Significant Discussions project, and is interim director at the Center for Teaching & Learning at Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006). *Paying double: Inadequate high schools and community college remediation*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, www.nchems.org. Retrieved from www.higheredinfo.org (Source: NCES: Common Core Data; IPEDS Residency and Migration, Fall Enrollment, and Graduation Rate Surveys - 2006)

