

Rend Lake College: Curriculum Mapping Contributes to Nationally Recognized Results

The Aspen Institute named Rend Lake one of the nation's top 150 community colleges in a quest to award the 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's signature recognition of high achievement and performance.¹ The Aspen Institute recognized Rend Lake's "exceptional institutional performance, improvement, and equity on student retention and completion measures."²

The Goal

After a decade of targeted cohort analysis on developmental education completion rates, Rend Lake College (RLC) set out to improve rates through strategically designed partnerships with feeder high schools. RLC facilitated collaboration with high schools in order to:

- align its curricula with high school standards³ adopted by the State of Illinois in order to smooth the pathway from high school to college, reducing the need for remediation,
- increase student success in the first year of college, along with increasing college graduation rates, and
- increase the number of Health Studies degrees and certificates awarded to meet regional demand.

The Environment

Rend Lake College in rural Illinois serves approximately 3,000 students annually. The college secured Title III Strengthening Institutions Program grant funding from 2013 – 2018 to support its effort to improve educational outcomes of low-income students.

Federal projections estimate 149,000 new jobs in the healthcare and social assistance sectors in Illinois by 2018. Illinois ranks as one of the states with the greatest shortage of healthcare professionals, and with more than a third of RLC students identifying completion of health studies as an educational goal, Rend Lake placed a special focus on Health Studies. Enrollment in these programs has increased 22 percent since the 2009-10 academic year.⁴

The Approach

The college partnered with the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) to explicitly align courses to state standards and local high school courses by using EPIC's "Map and Gap" technology and processes.

In 2012, RLC hosted an EPIC Bridge the Gap workshop sponsored by the Illinois Community College Board, Board of Higher Education, and State Board of Education. Given its rural location, RLC was already a trend-setter in fostering partnerships with the communities from which their students came by intentionally integrating the language of college expectations into the cultures of both the high school and the college campus. RLC immediately recognized the state's commitment to "bridging the gap" as an opportunity to focus their partnerships with high schools on decreasing the need for student remediation at RLC.

¹ Performance measures reviewed by Aspen included retention, graduation rates including transfers, and degrees and certificates per 100 "full-time equivalent" students

² Aspen Institute, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/news/2014/01/23/aspen-institute-names-top-150-us-community-colleges-eligible-2015-prize>

³ Common Core State Standards in Math and Science and the Next Generation Science Standards

⁴ Rend Lake College Title III overview, retrieved from <https://www.rlc.edu/title-iii>.

Ultimately, RLC's highly collaborative approach, respectful of the needs and interests of both the college and the high schools, "set the stage" for student success. Chris Kuberski, RLC's Vice President of Academic Instruction explained that "at that very first meeting, all we did was look at syllabi...[saying] this is what we expect in English 1101. Is this what you thought we were doing?" And for the following three years, RLC invited English, mathematics, and science teachers from local high schools to join RLC faculty in creating syllabi, a daunting task made more "intuitive" by using EPIC's CourseCreate software, according to Andrea Banach, RLC's Dean of Math & Sciences. RLC was able to enhance their work with high schools by revising current curriculum in CourseCreate during instructor workshops and then reviewing standards coverage among and across the typical course progression using EPIC's CoursePathway reports. Collaboration led to intentionally designed, sequential courses with appropriate coverage of the standards as well as sustained local partnerships among high schools and the college.

The Results

The process of curriculum alignment is best viewed as a means to a set of ends, designed with a long-term view. RLC is measuring results through targeted cohort analysis of developmental education completion rates. With only two cohorts of data available for analysis in math and English, the trend indicates an increase in developmental education course completion rates as measured by students receiving a C or better in the course following the developmental education course.

RLC faculty and high school teachers agree that the focus on guided pathways from high school to higher education is a necessary component for assuring student persistence and success.

RLC faculty report:

- The process of facilitating alignment fostered communication around common goals of student success. *"Previous to this, most of my changes were textbook-driven rather than objective or standards driven ... [the process] made us more real to the high school and made them more real to us."*
- The dual credit program is thriving and participating students find success at RLC. *"[Alignment] has had a tremendous impact on students. [They] are finding it less repetitive, one of [their] biggest complaints ... we feel that this course will help students dramatically in being successful in their ongoing courses."*
- Health Studies students are succeeding at higher rates than ever before at RLC. *"It's not that the [students] had never had the content, it's not that the teachers weren't rigorous, it is that the content was not refreshed enough and for the CTE kids, it was much too broad, and not specific enough."*

High school teachers report:

- Collaboration with higher education instructors is one of the most valuable aspects of alignment. *"It makes [me] feel a part of a learning community because ... they've been able to empower me as an instructor."*
- Being able to visualize course pathways within and across schools offers motivation to students. *"It feels really good to know, now using CourseCreate ... and evaluating using [CoursePathway] to see if there are any gaps."*
- Working with community college faculty provides great professional development. *"It's humbling because I feel like my curriculum is very thorough, but once you align it ... I found out that there are some things I need to touch on ... to find out where my students are lacking ... and the best way I can do that is to find out the where I can improve as an instructor."*

RLC's foresight in data collection on their students' developmental education completion rates will likely provide further empirical evidence on the success of using curricular alignment to decrease the need for developmental education and increase student persistence and completion rates. As colleges strive to improve results, the continuous, learning-centered process of alignment is never finished. Rend Lake College is proudly carrying this torch in rural, southern Illinois, keeping student achievement at the forefront of all their efforts.