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Strong Start Arkansas: Early Progress

LEARNING FROM
THE REFORM 
from STRONG START TO FINISH

August 2020

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About Strong Start to Finish

Right now, a first-year student sits in a college classroom being ill-served by remedial math. And if we fail them, they most likely will not earn their degree. There is a persistent trend among students placed in remedial or developmental courses—particularly math and English. They are not completing the courses and, in most cases, should not be taking them in the first place. This should not be their path.

We are a network of like-minded individuals and organizations from the policy, research, and practice spaces who've come together for one reason—to help all students, not just the select few, find success in postsecondary education.

[Strong Start to Finish](#), an initiative of [Education Commission of the States](#), was created to better the chances of low-income students, students of color, and returning adult students to create a fundamental shift in the outcome of their college journey. We have networked higher education leaders, policy entrepreneurs, institutions, and technical assistance providers to drive toward an outcome where all students pass their first credit-bearing English and math courses during the first year of study.

Introduction

Over the past several years, the state of Arkansas has embarked on a path of education reform to improve student outcomes by transforming the structure of remedial or developmental education. For example, many individual colleges and universities in the state have participated in a number of initiatives that are changing how developmental instruction is delivered, such as Arkansas Guided Pathways and Math Pathways to Completion. In addition, Arkansas community colleges have implemented the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) for English, which has involved developing corequisite courses for writing and reading. A Complete College America grant supported similar work with public 4-year institutions.

Corequisite course design in English is now happening at most public institutions in Arkansas. However, it is currently limited in terms of the number of students who are able to participate in those courses. Furthermore, development of corequisite math courses has lagged behind. As a result, the majority of students deemed underprepared in Arkansas public institutions are still enrolled in standalone developmental courses, especially in math. English and math faculty members have encouraged the reform work but need assistance in expanding corequisite offerings if change is to be implemented at scale.

Timeline of Reform	
2011	Federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant to implement ALP for English
2011	Complete College America grant to implement ALP at several 4-year colleges
2014	Begin work with Guided Pathways
2016	Begin work with Math Pathways
2018	Symposium on Accelerating Developmental English
2019	Launch of Strong Start Arkansas

Building on previous initiatives, Strong Start Arkansas (SSARK) was created as a partnership between the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) and Arkansas Community Colleges (ACC), which together include all 22 public 2-year and 10 public 4-year institutions in the state. As part of the project, Strong Start Arkansas is partnering with math and English faculty with the goal of scaling corequisite instruction that can support more students deemed as underprepared. To that end, Strong Start Arkansas project activities are focusing primarily on professional development and training for faculty that are tailored to the particular needs of each campus, supplemented by convenings for institutional academic leadership and other campus personnel involved in implementing the Strong Start Arkansas reforms.

Overall, Strong Start Arkansas has a goal of increasing corequisite courses to reach 50,000 students per

year by 2021. The project is focusing on four priority action areas to achieve this goal:

1. Phasing out virtually all standalone remedial courses in English and math
2. Eliminating the use of the single placement test score for placing students into remedial instruction
3. Expanding corequisite English Accelerated Learning Program (ALP)
4. Establishing and expanding math pathways across all institutions

To frame the project at its outset, Dr. Jessie Walker, Senior Associate Director at the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, sent a letter to all public colleges

announcing the state's participation in the project and support from the Governor's Office. Expectations were set that all institutions would participate and commit to placing 75% or more of underprepared students in corequisite instruction on their campuses. In addition, corequisite courses should be available for each college-level math course that is in the math pathways project. Institutions were asked to send teams of math and English faculty to trainings that would support project activities and goals.

In addition to overall oversight by ADHE and ACC, the institutional teams are being supported by a broader leadership team that includes a faculty representative in math and English—from both the 4- and 2-year sectors—as well as staff from the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Dana Center) and Complete College America (CCA). These organizations are providing resources and expertise to help faculty implement corequisite courses and are developing a group of regional faculty coordinators to provide assistance.

The following sections describe the context of reform within the state, the current status of project activities, and some early insights coming out of the work.

Policy Background

Placement Policies

ADHE has mandated that all institutions use multiple measures for student placement rather than a single cut score. Thus, each public college and university in Arkansas has developed a matrix of assessment measures that can be used to evaluate whether students are prepared for gateway courses. Student placement is now being determined based on each institution's approved ADHE placement policy, and beginning in 2018, reporting is based on students' actual enrollment in developmental education courses rather than on test scores.

The placement plans were developed based on each institution's examination of gateway course outcomes data. The plans must include two to four data metrics as well as information on the institutional practices that are being used to support students who are placed in prerequisite developmental courses, corequisite courses, or gateway courses.

The information may include explanations of advising practices, such as placement flowcharts or testing procedures; descriptions of all academic support courses for each gateway course; support strategies such as early alerts or attendance tracking; and assessment of course outcomes, curricular revisions, or impact on student progress measures.

Corequisite Instruction

Arkansas began implementing corequisite instruction in 2011 under a federal TAAACCT grant, which involved all 22 community colleges in Arkansas in the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) for English. The ALP model allows underprepared students to enroll in a college-level English course and receive academic support through a paired corequisite course. Under ALP, students placed in upper level developmental writing courses are invited to join one of the designated sections of ENG 101.

A Completion Challenge Grant from CCA extended the implementation of the ALP program to 4-year colleges, with promising results such as increases in completion of gateway courses. However, most of the institutions currently limit corequisite instruction to students who are just below the cut-off score for placement.

Math Pathways

ADHE and ACC have been working with the Dana Center since 2016 to establish alternative math pathways. The DCMP model consists of three pathways—Quantitative Reasoning, College Algebra (path to calculus), and Statistics. The model recommends using corequisite remedial instruction as part of the foundation for college-level math courses. To expand the math pathways efforts in Arkansas, a math task force composed of math faculty from every public institution in the state was convened, with support from the ADHE and ACC. The task force developed recommendations for math pathways implementation, vetted them across the state, developed a plan for scaling, and created working groups to implement the recommendations. One group defined learning outcomes for each math course and surveyed non-STEM degree faculty about the math competency needs of their students and subsequently issued recommendations on which math course would be most appropriate for certain non-STEM degree programs.

"Although the state has been working on scaling math pathways for over three years now, ... the work at the institution level in many ways is just beginning."

*-Jessie Walker, Senior Associate Director for Academic Affairs/
Research & Analytics, Arkansas Department of Education, Division of Higher Education*

Guided Pathways

Substantial work has also gone into Guided Pathways reforms in Arkansas, especially at 2-year colleges. The reforms have included faster transition of students into programs of study by using meta majors and other strategies. In 2014, several community colleges began their participation in the [Arkansas Guided Pathways](#) initiative organized by ACC—five initially and then another 11 colleges. The Arkansas Guided Pathways process used an Institute approach, similar to the [AACC Pathways Project](#).

Together, these initiatives have contributed to a culture supportive of institutional change for improved student success, including changes in developmental instruction in Arkansas. The next step is to build on these previous reform efforts and fully implement corequisite instruction at scale across all public institutions, in both math and English. This requires a broad effort to assist faculty to develop and successfully implement more corequisite courses for more students.

Priority Action Areas

To expand corequisite instruction across the state, standalone developmental courses are gradually being replaced with gateway English and math courses with corequisite support. A key goal is to make corequisite courses available for most students in each college-level math course in the Arkansas math pathways project, while expanding implementation of English corequisite courses for most underprepared students.

Strong Start Arkansas project activities supporting this work are largely through technical assistance such as convenings, online resources and tools, and faculty training. For example,

- Evidence-based technical assistance to leadership and faculty is being provided to all participating institutions, involving workshops, phone calls, and interactive virtual meetings with institutional teams of faculty, administrators, and advisors;
- English and math faculty participate in a series of training activities, both separately and combined;
- Regional coordinators work with campuses to provide ongoing assistance; and
- Institutional leadership teams develop action plans for implementation at scale.

Faculty Training

In fall 2018, Strong Start Arkansas began the process of getting institutional commitments and preparing participating institutions for the work ahead.

- Institutions were asked to participate in a pre-training webinar in March 2019 to prepare for faculty training meetings in April. The webinar provided an overview of the project, introduced regional coordinators, and prepared faculty on what to expect for the training sessions.
- Each institution was asked to identify the team of faculty and staff who would be leading the corequisite implementation on their campus.
- Also, in preparation for the April training sessions, a baseline survey of institutions was used to assess the extent to which corequisite English instruction was actually happening on each campus, as well as their short- and long-term needs for professional development.

On April 4, 2019, to officially kick off the project for English faculty, nearly 100 English faculty members from around the state participated in a day-long training conducted by CCA at the University of

Central Arkansas campus. Information from the baseline survey was used to inform the content and design of the sessions for English faculty, as well as showcasing promising practices. This meeting was followed by a two-day training conducted by the Dana Center for math faculty to kick off the math component of the project, held at the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton campus on April 11 and 12.

At both meetings, teams were informed about the requirement to develop action plans to implement or grow corequisite instruction on campus by fall 2021, with the goal of 75% of underprepared students enrolled in corequisite instruction. These action plans provide a map and timeline of how institutions can execute the activities and what types of resources may be needed.

Coordination and Technical Assistance

The project includes the recognition that although events such as workshops are important for assistance to institutional teams, they also need ongoing support to maintain momentum and use available tools and resources. Early in the project, two regional coordinators, both retired faculty members, were recruited and trained to provide the ongoing technical assistance. Project partners met with the regional coordinators to establish expectations and provide resources and tools. The coordinators were assigned to stay in touch with 15 institutions each, including reporting on project progress and sharing institutions' technical assistance needs with CCA and the Dana Center. The goal is to build relationships with campus leaders to offer support on a regular basis; teams benefit by having a consistent contact who is familiar with the campus context and goals and can connect them to resources. This ongoing assistance also helps build momentum for continuous change and improvement.

Progress on Action Plans

CCA and the Dana Center hosted webinars in May 2019 to emphasize the requirement to submit institutional action plans for implementing corequisite instruction. As of October 2019, about two-thirds of the institutions had submitted their initial action plans. Project leadership, CCA, and the Dana Center are working closely with the remaining institutions to help them finish their plans.

The next steps are for regional coordinators to follow up with their assigned teams to track their progress, provide assistance, get input on what is needed for faculty trainings, and respond to needs as they arise—all in coordination with the Dana Center and CCA. The two organizations are developing interactive virtual sessions based on topics identified by the regional coordinators. In addition, content experts on specific implementation issues may be brought in as needed.

To further assist teams in implementing their action plans, they attended two English Corequisite Support Trainings in fall 2019, and an additional two Math Corequisite Support Trainings. Subsequently, the Dana Center and CCA will offer follow-up training tailored to specific institutional needs.

Successes, Challenges and Lessons

"We picked the right partners, and the partners know how to work well together."

-Mike Leach, Director of the Center for Student Success at ACC

Successes to Date

According to Strong Start Arkansas project leaders, the collaborative working relationship among all partners—ACC and ADHE as well as CCA and the Dana Center—has contributed to the project's success to date. For example, the partners came together to collaboratively plan and implement the large kick-off events. As the project has rolled out, that collaboration has continued to execute all the other training and technical assistance described above. The partnership is strengthened by the fact that each organization brings a unique strength and needed perspective and expertise to achieving the overall project goals. Another factor has been the work that was achieved prior to Strong Start Arkansas, which provided a foundation for the current work. In particular, previous initiatives developed faculty engagement and buy-in—the math pathways efforts over the past three years as well as the work of English faculty to implement the ALP program at many institutions. This meant that faculty have not been difficult to engage from the start. At the Strong Start Arkansas kickoff meetings, the math and English faculty trainings were well attended and included representation from institutions. "This engagement has been and will no doubt continue to be valuable for achieving the project goals," according to Leach.

Challenges

Given that the project was officially launched in spring 2019, the team has not seen major challenges. There are a few institutions that did not send faculty to the initial training sessions and some that indicated hesitancy about the project design; in part, these concerns were related to a lack of understanding of corequisite remediation or having tried a corequisite approach that didn't appear to have positive results.

The project leaders and partners have worked individually with these institutions to address their initial concerns and help them move forward with the work.

Another challenge, especially for the 2-year colleges that typically serve more underprepared students, is skepticism that corequisite courses can serve the most underprepared. This topic has and will continue to be a focus of the faculty training and other technical assistance provided by Strong Start Arkansas.

Emerging Lessons

Although it is still early, one thing that has become clear is that different institutions need different types of support. This has been especially true in the case of English faculty. There are varying levels of experience with implementing ALP, for example, with some faculty members ready to move to the next phase and others having little exposure to corequisite instruction. As a result, the project partners have developed a range of professional development activities that meet each team's needs. The math pathways work has been more similar across institutions, with less variation in experience level, but it appears that "frequent and meaningful" contact with math faculty will be equally important as the project progresses.

In general, Strong Start Arkansas project leaders have recognized that designing technical assistance so that it considers the varying needs of institutions is crucial. Thus, the partners are conducting surveys of the institutions to help design the next phase of professional development activities and have offered an increasing range of support activities including campus site visits to meet with critical

faculty and personnel involved in the project work. The management team is also considering ways to encourage institutions to be accountable for progress, including asking institutions to commit to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ADHE that will provide some nominal funding to the institution to support the project work over the next few years. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that even with a good foundation of faculty engagement and training and technical assistance, it takes many years for changes to be implemented at scale.

Next Steps

Thus far, most of the Strong Start Arkansas project activities have focused on faculty trainings, provision of expert assistance, and creation of institutional action plans to implement corequisite courses on campuses across the state. As the project moves forward, the following activities will be ongoing.

- **Communication:** Additional webinars, emails to leadership teams, research and other written materials will be used to assist institutions on their progress toward implementation of corequisite English and math instruction and to receive feedback on how they might continuously improve implementation.
- **Training:** Additional faculty and administrator trainings will focus on how to support planning and implementation. For example, convenings will be hosted to further support institutional leadership and mid-level academic leadership to implement project goals. Training for advisors also will be provided.
- **Data for Continuous Improvement:** Additional data to assist institutions in measuring progress and support continuous improvement will be collected from the colleges by the management team partners. Trainings for institutional research staff will be provided and will focus on recommended data gathering and analysis for continuous improvement.
- **Regional coordinators:** Over the next two years, the regional coordinators will coordinate tailored support to institutions through a combination of

follow-up calls with campus leadership teams, campus site visits with leadership teams, and interactions with content experts.

- **Sharing results:** A convening to share progress is planned for 2020, which will include publishing a set of short briefs to highlight innovative practices.

In addition, the project envisions a comprehensive set of online resources on a web-based platform that provides content about implementation of corequisite remediation in practice in Arkansas. The Dana Center and CCA are helping to develop these online resources, in partnership with other project management partners. The project activities and planned resources will help Arkansas continue to build momentum to achieve the goals of Strong Start Arkansas.