DESIGNING A CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT PROGRAM

Colleges invest in student success by connecting effective curriculum and competencies through an ongoing, phased examination process. Aligned curricular pathways ensure that learning outcomes match career and educational goals. They provide confidence to students and employers that vital knowledge and skills are represented by a credential and may influence the success and completion rates of students.

Identify the Problems to Solve
Before implementing any process or program, it is important to identify the immediate and long-term problems the college aims to address. Curriculum alignment can be a part of the solution for addressing many common problems.

- **Immediate Problems** like low rates of completion in gateway or developmental education courses or low rates of minority, first-generation, or low-income students enrolling from targeted high schools
- **Mid-Range Problems** like difficulty transferring course credits across intuitions, resulting in students losing time, money, and motivation
- **Long-Term Problems** like poorly prepared graduates with skills that do not meet market needs or low college completion rates

Select Scope and Focus
The focus of an alignment effort can be as narrow as the alignment of two courses within a postsecondary program of study (for example, a developmental math course and the first college-credit mathematics course) or broadened to include all courses in a department or discipline. The scoping might implicate the alignment of an entire program and related credentials, both within colleges and across institutional boundaries such as K-12 to local community colleges

Identify Inputs and Resources
Once the scope and focus is determined, the next step is to make sure that all the necessary inputs and resources for the alignment process are in place to yield the targeted results. Along with a plan and a budget, successful alignment efforts incorporate the following:

1. **Technology.** Curriculum development and alignment software to expedite information gathering and sorting and data systems that track student learning and progression.
2. **Standards/Competencies.** Selection of internally established standards or proposed frameworks from professional discipline-based organizations, industry groups, competency-based standards at the K–12 level, or even the Degree Qualifications Profile framework developed by Lumina\(^1\) to guide the alignment work.
3. **Faculty and staff development.** Professional development and time that will allow all those involved in building the curricular pathway to understand and assist in the selection of standards/competencies, be adept at collaboration, and have the capacity to analyze data.
4. **Institutional research capacity.** Staff time and technology in the institutional research office to provide data for student cohort analysis as alignment brings focus to achieving

---

measurable results. Colleges must also commit to measure and report results and share data with K–12 and university partners.

5. **Partnerships.** Effective collaboration within colleges and with partner institutions is essential to address the gaps within a disjointed educational system where “different sectors have established their own expectations and requirements for learning objectives, assessment, graduation, and admissions, creating great variance both within and between educational systems.”

**Sequence the Work**

Colleges take the following steps when aligning the curriculum and pathways:

1. **Outreach to partners** (including high schools, partner universities, and business and industry) invites joint planning of initial alignment that crosses institutional boundaries and ensures connection to workplace standards/competencies.

2. **Professional development programs** prepare faculty and staff to engage in curriculum and co-curriculum alignment. After the alignment activities, development programs are planned related to teaching, advisement, and assessment within the newly aligned curriculum and co-curriculum pathways.

3. **Faculty and staff** collaborate to revise the pathways to meet college alignment goals, ensuring that curricula, co-curricula, standards, competencies, instruction, and assessment are documented electronically to be in vertical and horizontal alignment, reflecting clear and consistent expectations of students, within the college and across institutions. For example, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education partnered with the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) to create a regional network of high school and college faculty creating paired courses to promote a seamless transition for students from high school to college.

4. **Curriculum mapping** at the program level aligns the content and assessment of outcomes throughout a program of study, ensuring that curriculum is properly sequenced, that students are exposed to program outcomes, and student mastery of those competencies is assessed in a purposeful and meaningful way. Valencia College, for example, wants to make sure that regardless of the unique set of courses a student has selected, the college is intentional about where, when, and how the student will encounter each of the program’s student learning outcomes and how the student’s mastery of those outcomes will be assessed.

5. **Assessment and data analysis**, supported by the institutional research teams, enables faculty and staff to access and interpret data, to monitor student progress, and to evaluate the success of aligned curricula and co-curricula pathways. Online reporting systems provide routine feedback on student learning and progression within the college and across boundaries with partner institutions.

6. **Outreach to high school students** is emphasized to make clear that postsecondary education is possible and to explain what is required to be successful.

---


Educational Policy Improvement Center

The Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) is an innovative, nationally recognized non-profit organization founded by Dr. David Conley, a pioneer in college and career readiness policy and research. EPIC conducts research and provides consulting services and systems to support educators in promoting college and career readiness and post-secondary success and completion.

EPIC’s focus is college and career readiness across the P-20 continuum. Our alignment experts have been working with schools for over 8 years to help educators across the country ensure their courses cover the necessary content to prepare students for postsecondary education.

Contact us:
- to learn more about the impact the Bridge Method can have on your community college
- for an extended planning toolkit (including a logic model)
- to access white papers and case studies of institutions successfully addressing alignment
- on the web for testimonials about how the Bridge Method connects students to success

Through faculty and staff engagement and empowerment focused on articulating and smoothing curriculum transitions, the Bridge Method supports academic curriculum alignment as a catalyst to both prevent and solve challenging educational problems with the goal of increasing student academic success and institutional success.

We'd love to talk with you about how the Bridge Method can help strengthen the quality, transparency, and connectivity of credentials.

Kirsten L. Aspengren
EPIC Senior Director
Bridge the Divide
kirsten_aspengren@epiconline.org
(877) 766-2279
The Bridge Method is a curriculum creation/revision and alignment program designed to empower and engage instructors in the processes of 1) incorporating standards into their curriculum using a quality syllabus format and 2) collaborating to map and gap standards coverage across a set of courses. This attention to a connected process improves the quality and transparency of students’ earned credentials and enhances the economic strength and on-the-job success of students earning a certificate or degree.

The Bridge Method is housed within the Educational Policy Improvement Center’s (EPIC) Bridge the Divide division. It employs a series of EPIC’s signature, convergent-consensus methods refined and perfected over 15 years of work. EPIC aims to develop practical tools and techniques that support a dramatic improvement in college and career readiness for students.

The first step is for an educational institution (be it K-12 or higher education) to define their academic problem. That effort will organically lead to the identification of courses to be included in the alignment process and the appropriate standards/frameworks to use. At that point, the Bridge Method is primed to work with instructors, who will begin by reviewing, revising or developing curriculum to demonstrate coverage of the standards/framework. Comparing curriculum promotes collaborative mapping and gapping of standards across courses and across institutions to further refine a curriculum and/or pathway. Embracing this collaborative process allows educators, students, and employers to know that critical competencies are continually taught, updated, and validated within a program.
To accelerate and document the process for ongoing replication, the Bridge Method often uses EPIC-developed online software, **CourseCreate and CoursePathway:**

- **CourseCreate:** Instructors develop/revise course content in an online system that guides the syllabus development process using self-identification of curriculum to standards. Instructors can reuse and update course syllabi and administrators have syllabi in consistent formats.
- **CoursePathway:** Instructors and administrators create course sequences to identify coverage gaps and redundancies. Course and pathway reports visually demonstrate the absence or coverage of standards and support collaborative course revisions.

**About EPIC**

The Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) is an innovative, nationally recognized, non-profit organization founded by Dr. David Conley, a pioneer in college and career readiness policy and research. EPIC conducts research and provides consulting services and systems to support educators in promoting college and career readiness and post-secondary success and completion.

---

**Contact us for case studies of colleges and high schools successfully addressing alignment or visit our website for information and testimonials about EPIC’s alignment work.**

We'd love to talk with you about how the Bridge Method can help strengthen the quality, transparency, and connectivity of credentials.

For more information, go to [http://www.epiconline.org/what-we-do/bridge-the-divide/](http://www.epiconline.org/what-we-do/bridge-the-divide/)

Or contact Kirsten L. Aspengren, EPIC Senior Director

[kirsten_aspengren@epiconline.org](mailto:kirsten_aspengren@epiconline.org)

(541) 246-2600
Top-Performing Colleges Pay Close Attention to Curriculum Alignment

The success stories of many of the nation’s best community colleges reveal the role curriculum alignment plays in delivering top results.

1. The Aspen Institute’s Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence is the nation’s signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America’s community colleges. The award recognizes institutions for exceptional student outcomes in four areas: student learning, certificate and degree completion, employment and earnings, and high levels of access and success for minority and low-income students.¹ The 2011 Prize winner, Valencia College² (Orlando, FL), the 2015 Rising Star winner, Kennedy-King College¹ (Chicago, IL), and Aspen’s 2015 top 150 community colleges, Rend Lake College⁵ (Ina, IL) are noted for their deep commitment to creating pathways and aligning curricula.

2. Columbus State Community College (Columbus, OH) is making national headlines with reform efforts centered in collaborative partnerships, including its Central Ohio Compact. One of the Compact’s strategic principles involves providing “all students with the essential knowledge and skills needed for a successful transition into postsecondary learning” through alignment. Strategic actions include 1) “improv[ing] the alignment of high school and higher education courses” and 2) “substantially reduc[ing] the need for college remediation by urging all students to complete a rigorous, college-prep curriculum and by offering [in the high school senior year] developmental programs ... which are high school-college partnerships that involve placement testing and the delivery of pre-college math to prepare students for the college experience.”⁴ In October 2014, CSCC President, David Harrison, told the Atlantic Monthly, “We realized from a higher-ed standpoint that if we could get all of this aligned, it would be a real competitive advantage for our region.”⁵

3. The Community College Research Center at Columbia University Teachers College has developed a three-part practitioner packet to support guided pathways to reform colleges.⁶ Curriculum alignment is both foundational and the next frontier in the presentation of courses within highly structured, coherent pathways. The packet calls out alignment work at two CUNY institutions -- Guttman Community College and Queensborough Community College -- and includes a full case study on Miami Dade College’s work in this area.

4. An example of a successful local partnership is the DirectConnect to UCF Consortium in Central Florida, uniting local school districts, four feeder community colleges, and the University of Central Florida (UCF) to increase the educational attainment of students. This consortium has invested in curriculum and co-curriculum alignment and reports improved college readiness on the part of high school

graduates, award-winning levels of community college student success, and the highest transfer rate in the nation for community college students to the upper division.\(^7\)

**Why is Curriculum Alignment So Powerful?**

In addition to nationally recognized colleges, researchers in higher education and major educational funding organizations have encouraged a focus on curriculum alignment. Here is what some experts say about curriculum alignment.

1. Achieving the Dream reports on findings and strategic policy priorities to reduce the need for developmental education through K-12 and postsecondary curricular alignment.\(^8\)
2. Harold G. Levine & Michael W. Kirst: [Our concern] “stems from the historical disjuncture and lack of alignment between K-12 and higher education.”\(^9\)
3. David T. Conley & Paul L. Gaston: “A coordinated strategy to prepare students to succeed in college would ... bridge an unfortunate and harmful cultural chasm between the K-12 world and that of higher education.”\(^10\)
4. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Completion by Design initiative has identified eight principles\(^11\) in a guide to redesigning community colleges for increases in student completion. Curriculum alignment is a foundational component for integrating these strategies into a comprehensive plan to increase student success and timely degree or certificate completion rates.
5. Michal Kurlaender & Jessica Howell at the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center: “Early information about college readiness and improved alignment between K–12 and higher education has been demonstrated to reduce remediation need.”\(^12\)
6. Charis McGaughy and Andrea Venezia devote an entire chapter to the specific discussion of how local partnerships can collaborate to align curriculum in their book *Supporting the Dream: High School—College Partnerships for College and Career Readiness.*
   a. “Local partnerships ... vertical teams [can] work to transcend boundaries, increase alignment, and narrow the gaps between the secondary and postsecondary systems.”\(^13\)
   b. “What needs to be emphasized ... is that this is a systems alignment issue; no group or institution is solely responsible for creating the problems, and no one group or educational entity can solve the problems individually.”\(^14\)

---