REINFORCED INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENT EXCELLENCE (RISE)

Student Focus Groups Report Spring 2019

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Executive Summary

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Student Feedback on RISE Implementation:
Important Information for Presidents & Senior Leaders

The RISE Evaluation Team has completed 4 focus groups with students to harvest early learning for improving implementation as the state moves toward full implementation across all 58 colleges.

We urge you to take a moment to review the information here, as most of what follows relates to the role that your leadership plays in determining the success of RISE implementation. We are committed to providing the help you need to be successful in your leadership role, so we also urge you to share back with us any reactions/questions you have about what we're learning and how we can improve our support to you.

First, we want to share the good news that deserves recognition. By and large, students feel that they are being accurately placed through the RISE placement process and that the support course paired with the parent course is giving them a path to success. This is *very* encouraging feedback, and a sign of your hard work paying off! We are also hearing examples of creative support for students in the RISE pilots that all the colleges would benefit from learning about early:

1) **Supporting Students in the Summer**: To handle the challenge of offering the RISE courses during the shorter summer semester, some colleges are "flipping" the class by offering the co-req face-to-face and the parent course online. This promising approach is based on the recognition that student progress is harmed if these courses are not offered in the summer. The colleges that are innovating on behalf of students in this way are also most likely to be challenging the injurious policy in the transition course of erasing a student's work after 5 weeks of dormancy, a policy which we would suggest ought not apply during the summer. We encourage colleges to follow these examples of pedagogical innovation and commitment to removing artificial barriers to student success or develop their own.

2) **Curriculum/Basic Skills Connections**: We have examples of colleges offering the transition course through both the curriculum side of the college and through their Basic Skills division. This approach is helping students with greater needs get the right support at the right time *before* they get to the curriculum. The colleges leading the way in this

are showing what gains can be made when committed, creative faculty build strong, silo-busting collaborations on behalf of better outcomes for students.

Opportunities for Improvement:

Amid the good news and examples of student-focused innovation, our engagement with students has surfaced a number of challenges that we want to highlight for you. While the first of the challenges relates to resource issues that will need to be addressed by colleges if RISE is to be successfully implemented, most of the challenges we've identified by listening closely to students are ones that you can help your colleges overcome without intensive resource allocation.

1) **Student/Tutor Ratio**: While we know that resource constraints are always a challenge, we urge colleges to cap math transition classes at 30 students per section, and English transition classes at 20 students per section, with a ratio of 1 faculty/tutor per 10 students. Students enrolled in the RISE pilot are confirming what faculty have shared that where there are more than 10 students per tutor, students are not receiving the support they need to be successful. Finding ways to do more with less is an admirable art practiced by North Carolina's community colleges, but this is an area where students will be harmed if these courses are not sufficiently staffed.

2) **Supporting Faculty**: Based on insights gleaned from students and our classroom observations, students communicated that the computer-aided (emporium) environment for transition courses could be altered to include "mini-lectures." Students enjoyed the flexibly-paced environment but felt a need for some more traditional teaching. To achieve this, faculty could benefit from technical training and peer sharing around best practices in the balance between flexible-pace and formal teaching for transition courses. Professional development would be largely about helping faculty become familiar with effective practices. *(See our forthcoming faculty focus group report for additional information on faculty perspectives.)*

3) **Communication between co-requisite and gateway faculty.** We also heard from students' experiences, that the quality and frequency of communication between gateway and co-requisite faculty has an enormous impact on student perception of the effectiveness of the model. Communication should have the goal of keeping the gateway and co-requisite course content aligned. Again, this is not a deep technical challenge – this is about faculty and academic administrators attending to small adjustments that will have an enormous impact on student experience and student success.

RISE was designed following nationally-proven models, models that are resulting in dramatic gains with students passing gateway Math and English at 2 or even 3 times the rate of those provided with the traditional approach to remediation as a separate system (Complete College America, 2016; Denley, 2016; Tennessee Board of Regents, 2015). But the success of North Carolina's effort to scale remediation reform through RISE is not guaranteed. If North Carolina is to see the same results as other states leading the way in remediation reform it will because leaders like you will have effectively attended to supporting high-quality implementation. We are committed to providing campus leaders with insights like those summarized here in order to help you succeed in removing all the artificial barriers that impede your students' ability to achieve their goals.

REINFORCED INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENT EXCELLENCE (RISE)

Student Focus Groups Report

Purpose of this Report

The purpose of this report is to share what we've learned from students taking RISE transition and co-requisite courses at four NC Community Colleges in Spring 2019. We are interested in learning the experiences of students related to their placement in the course, advising they received, and the structure of the course. Additionally, we wanted to understand the student perception of the usefulness of what they are learning in the courses and how that applies to their future gateway (for transition students) or current gateway courses (for co-requisite students). This information is meant to inform RISE implementation and to aid colleges in making decisions to best promote student success and to meet the goals of RISE.

Goals of RISE

There have been many developmental education reforms which have occurred over the last several years and success in gateway courses has improved but it has not improved quickly enough for all students. The objective of RISE is to increase gatekeeper momentum and to begin to close the equity gap.

The goals of RISE include properly placing students into gateway level courses with or without mandated co-requisite support, elimination of a placement test (except for students more than 10 years out of high school and other rare cases), and raising the GPA criteria from 2.6 to 2.8.

- We aim to significantly improve the number of students who successfully pass gateway courses.
- We will place more students in gateway level math and English with mandated co-requisite support.
- We will provide one semester (or less) of developmental education to students entering the community college system with an unweighted high school GPA below 2.2 and more than two points below the ACT benchmarks.

- We will provide students with success skills, growth mindset activities, and soft skills in co-requisite and transition courses.
- We strive to ensure we are able to effectively collect data and assess the efficacy of RISE.
- We will eliminate placement testing, except for students more than 10 years out of high school and in other rare cases.

Methods

Data Collection

During February and March 2019, we interviewed and observed students at four North Carolina Community Colleges who are RISE pilots. Only members of the North Carolina Community College System Office and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research were present, faculty and staff from the college were not in the room. All students read and signed an informed consent form found in Appendix A.

All four colleges are currently teaching the math and English transition courses as well as the RISE co-requisite math and English courses. Classroom observations included: MAT 003, MAT 043, MAT 052, MAT 071, ENG 002, and ENG 011. In total, 45 students were interviewed through focus groups across all four colleges. Student focus groups were representative of Math and English transition courses as well as Math and English co-requisite courses. One college elected to have students complete a survey that was comprised of the same questions asked in the focus group, 247 responses were recorded.

Overview of Participating Colleges

All four colleges we visited taught their transition and co-requisite courses in curriculum. One college began teaching some aspects of the RISE model in Fall 2018 and the other three colleges began with full RISE implementation in Spring 2019. For co-requisite courses, most courses are offered face-to-face with some instances of co-requisite English being taught online. At least one college had a model where faculty who teach the gateway course also taught the corresponding co-requisite.

One college was utilizing a shortened co-requisite class and the remaining contact hours were fulfilled by students attending an open lab. One of the four colleges were multi-campus and opted to adopt RISE courses for all of their locations.

Findings and Recommendations

Overwhelmingly, the students we spoke with shared that they believed they were placed in the correct course. This included both transition students and co-requisite students. Students also shared with us that they believed the content in the transition course was preparing them for the future math and English course they would need to take to graduate. Students in the co-requisite course pointed to specific examples of how the support class was helping them succeed in their gateway math and English courses. RISE is showing promise that it works as planned to support student success.

Students also communicated to us barriers that they are experiencing through RISE. Below are the barriers they communicated to us as well as our suggested solutions to further aid in student success at our colleges:

Finding 1: Summer

Students at two (of four) colleges shared concerns about wanting to maintain momentum over the summer. They believed that their options for course taking were limited over the summer due to few offerings of co-requisite and transition courses or no offerings of these courses. Additionally, students mentioned concern that they would have to start the transition course over in the Fall semester if they were unsuccessful in completing their tiers before the end of Spring. These students had major life events occurring over the summer that would prevent them from taking the transition course in the summer.

Recommendations: Summer

When colleges are making decisions about offering courses over the summer, the impact on student progress can be an important consideration. For example, students entering competitive entry programs with Fall-only application may be more disadvantaged by not offering courses over the summer. The best practice is for policies to allow students to maintain momentum and progress over the summer. Winter break and summer break pose different concerns and policies around student momentum in RISE courses should also differ.

We recognize that there are many contact hours that must be accounted for with RISE courses. One college decided to do a hybrid approach where the gateway course was offered online and the co-requisite is offered in person. Creative solutions that can help mitigate time constraints but ensure students are able to take courses when they need them to progress toward graduation are encouraged.

Finding 2: Additional Supports

Students shared that they are taking advantage of additionally supports by way of tutoring or skills labs. When they are in the skills lab, students mentioned they are seeking content specific help (eg. statistics help for MAT 152). If there weren't tutors or faculty available in the labs for a specific content area, students felt like they were not getting as much from the experience and were "checking the box" on what they were supposed to be doing.

In the transition courses where the teacher/student ratio exceeded 10 students: 1 faculty/professional tutor, students felt like they were either unable to move forward because faculty were busy with other students or being pushed too fast to keep up. We observed English transition faculty working hard to speak with students one-on-one but had to pause to grade assignments in real time to allow students who were ready the ability to move forward.

Recommendations: Additional Supports

Based on students feedback, we would recommend that if out of class lab/tutoring is required, perhaps with the goal of accommodating students' schedules, then the subject matter expert (SME) also needs to be available. If this is not possible, finding a way to ensure that when students are seeking help the correct SME is available would be another best practice.

In classrooms where the faculty: student ratio exceeds 10:1, colleges could consider hiring professional tutors or teaching assistants to assist in the classroom and lower this ratio.

Finding 3: Length of Class/Structure

Students communicated that when they have the co-requisite class and gateway class on the same day, that it was too much time spent on one subject. Students in the transition courses also suggested that three hours all at once is too much.

Students also shared that the overall time spent on the class was appropriate and they did not want to shorten the course, but splitting it up would help make the work more manageable.

Students also shared a desire for faculty in the transition course to give mini-lectures during class on subjects that are widely applicable to all students. In the transition course, students discussed their need for more formal instruction time (such as mini-lectures) as being important for their learning but they also wanted to balance this with the flexible paced work in NROC.

Recommendations: Length of Class/Structure

We understand that scheduling class times is complex and varies by colleges. We recommend that colleges, whenever possible schedule transition and co-requisite courses in multiple ways, offering students the option to take transition courses on multiple days for shorter blocks of time or offering co-requisite courses on alternating days and not just on the same day as the gateway course.

We recommend the use of mini-lectures in the transition course on subjects that would be useful to all or most students. For example, all students may be able to benefit from a mini-lecture on comma splices. We encourage faculty to use the shared resources from instructors that are available in the RISE google drive to help with mini-lesson development.

Finding 4: Instructor Communication

Students in co-requisite classes commented that it did not seem like faculty who taught the gateway course and co-requisite were in communication with one another, except in the cases where the instructor is the same. Students felt that more communication was necessary to help with alignment, especially around the time of tests.

Students communicated that they were concerned they were being "test cases" to see if a new program worked (re: RISE transition courses). In some instances, we learned that instructors complained about RISE directly to students and inferred that they were part of an experiment. Students were understandably upset by this message and when asked if they were also aware of successes that have been observed in other states, they indicated they were not aware.

Recommendations: Instructor Communication

Based on student feedback we recommend that instructors of co-requisite and gateway courses develop a system for communication. In focus groups with faculty they highlighted some practices they are currently using to facilitate communication, including weekly emails/meetings to discuss plans for the week and shared course checklists that provide all dates for both classes.

We recognize that implementing RISE is a huge lift for institutions and faculty and appreciate the willingness to pilot the program. With that, we also recognize that we are still growing and learning in this process. We hope that faculty will take this opportunity to make RISE their own! This is a chance to develop, refine, and create in the classroom and we highly encourage creativity!

Finding 5: Advising

While students believed that they were appropriately placed in their courses, they often did not know how they were placed. Few students articulated that they talked about their placement with an advisor. Along with this they were unsure about the required number of tiers they needed to take for their program.

Recommendations: Advising

We know that advisors face the challenge of providing students with a lot of information. In order to better support students on their pathway, we encourage RISE college leads to meet with advisors to provide clarity about the structure and identify the best ways to discuss with students. In conjunction with SOVA solution, we developed a one-pager (Appendix C) that can be used as a handout for students. We encourage updates to this document based on institutional context and best practices.

Conclusion

Based on student feedback, RISE is placing students in the co-requisite or transition course that will best prepare them for success in their gateway math or English course. Students communicated that the content of the co-requisite course was aiding in their success and that the content was directly applicable to topics and assignments in the corresponding gateway course. Students in the transition course believed the course would help them be successful in their future gateway course.

Though these are promising results, students also communicated opportunities for colleges to further aid in their success. The five theme areas were (1) summer as a momentum point (2) additional supports (3) length of class/structure (4) instructor communication (5) advising. Students provided recommendations about their preferences and how each of these areas could be improved. Overall, improved communication about RISE placement and how placement aligns with student academic goals, as well as improved communication between instructors were cited as best practices. Structurally, students cited practices that could be improved upon such as co-requisite and transition class length, the desire for some formal instruction in transition courses, and the need for additional supports to be SME.

Student input about their experience in RISE co-requisite and transition courses is a valuable insight into how policies and practices are implemented on the ground. Too often this voice is missing from our decision making and policy implementation processes. We hope that the information provided here can aid policy and practice decisions for colleges implementing RISE.

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE)
Student Focus Groups

As part of the RISE Program, we are interviewing focus groups of students to understand their experiences in the co-requisite and transition Math and English courses.

Your Math or English course has been selected to participate in a student focus group. The focus group will occur before or after your regularly scheduled class period on _____(date). Participation in this focus group is voluntary. Participation in the focus group will in no way impact your grade or academic standing in your course. You are welcome to decline to participate and have the option to leave the focus group at any time.

Evaluation team members from NC State and the NC Community College System Office will conduct the focus group. A team member will also take notes on discussion as the focus group occurs but no names or identifying information will be recorded.

Names of participants will be kept confidential and notes taken during the focus group will be kept in a password protected file that is only available to the evaluation team. No identifying information will be associated with you in any reports or publications. Select quotations may be used in reports and publications, but pseudonyms will be used in place of actual names to protect your identity.

By signing below, you agree to participate in this focus group.

_____
Student Name (Print)

_____
Student Name (Signature)

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

Questions for All

- Describe your experience in your [Transition Course or Co-Req course]
- Do you believe this support class is helping you improve your math/English skills?
- Describe to what extent your class has used the following supports:
    - Allowed time for one-on-one teacher/student discussions.
    - Had mini-lectures or formal teaching.
    - In class activities or worksheets.
    - Any others?
- How do you feel about being placed in to this course?
    - *If students suggests they are not happy - ask*, where do you think you should have been placed?
- What type of advising (formal and informal) have you received about your placement in either [Transition Course or Co-Req course]
    - From who?
- How do you think being in this course [will help prepare you for your /is helping you in] gateway course?
- How is your experience in either this course supporting your learning in other courses?

Co-Requisite Course Specific

- What types of activities are you doing in your co-requisite course?
- What types of activities are responsible for doing outside of the classroom for this course?
- What types of activities are you receiving a grade for?
- Describe to what extent your class has used the following supports:
    - Reinforced skills learned in the gateway class (ENG 111, MAT 143, 152, 171).
    - Taught new content beyond your gateway class.
- Do you think you'd be able to be successful in the gateway course without this course?
    - How so?
- What do you like about this course?
- What could be improved about this course?
- In what ways what your learning in this course relate to what you are doing in your gateway course?
- Is your co-requisite course [Math or English] taught by the same instructor as your gateway course in [Math or English]

- Is the time at which this class offered well suited? Please select the current structure of your class and then comment about what would have helped you more as a student.
  - co-requisite class immediately after gateway class
  - co-requisite class immediately before gateway class
  - co-requisite class on a different day as co-requisite class
- Are all of the students in your co-req in the same gateway course with you?
  - If not, do you know if you all have the same instructor for your gateway course?

Transition Course Specific

- What types of activities are you doing in your transition course?
  - Would you like to have more lessons delivered by your classroom teacher?
- Do you believe the design of this class is helping you improve your math/English skills?
- Do you believe the NROC/EdReady videos share information in a manner that is helping increase your math/English knowledge?
- Does the NROC/EdReady product work without any technical challenges for you?
- Do you know what gateway math course you need to take for your intended degree program?
- Do you know what your goal is in terms of how many tiers you hope to complete?
- What do you like about this course?
- What could be improved about this course?

Appendix C: One-Pager for Students

Saving You Time & Money, Helping You Reach Your Goals Faster
Understanding Math & English Placement

Why am I being put into these math or English classes?
- All 58 of North Carolina's community colleges are changing the way they support entering college students
- Students are now placed into new, accelerated classes in math and English
- These classes are proven to help students reach their goals faster
- We call this program RISE (Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence)

How is this different?
- Most students take no placement tests
- Placement is based on unweighted high school GPA
  - Students with a GPA of 2.8 or higher may enroll in their gateway math and English courses without any other requirement
  - Students with a GPA between a 2.2 – 2.799 may enroll in a gateway math or English, but with a mandatory 'co-requisite' support course
  - Students coming in with a high school GPA less than 2.2 will enroll in a one-semester 'transition' math and/or English course

Why is it better?
- One semester transition courses take the place of two or more semesters of the previous developmental courses
- Co-requisite courses let students get the extra support they need to be successful in college courses while saving time and money
- The new approach makes it faster and easier for students to get just the right amount of support they need when they need it
- This approach has been proven to be better and faster for students, but it is different and different can be confusing - asking the right questions is important!

Ask Your Advisor!
- Which Math class do I need for my degree?
- Considering my course requirements, what transition courses do I need to complete and what are my options?
- Which courses count toward my degree?
- Who can I ask if I have more questions?