CHAPTER 5
Aligning YouthBuild Curriculum, Instructional Practice, and Assessment with Postsecondary Experiences

Academic preparation is one of the most important factors contributing to students’ postsecondary success. Academic preparation is also one of the most challenging goals while YouthBuild programs prepare students for their postsecondary journey. Many students enter YouthBuild with significant academic deficiencies, particularly in reading and math. Further complicating these challenges, most YouthBuild programs have only 9-12 months to help students earn GED/High School diplomas while preparing them for postsecondary success.

Despite these obstacles, YouthBuild programs and their postsecondary partners dedicate considerable time, energy, and resources to improve curriculum and instruction. Finding the right balance of rigor and supports for students to develop career and postsecondary skills and knowledge is a complex process. An effective alignment effort requires ongoing commitment, communication, and accountability from leadership and instructional staff on both sides of the postsecondary partnership.

Staff from postsecondary institutions play an important role in collaborating with YouthBuild staff and students to increase academic rigor and supports within the YouthBuild program. When done well, this collaboration can ensure that students transition into postsecondary education with the tools to succeed. Specifically, PSE leadership, staff, and faculty can support the academic alignment process by working with YouthBuild instructors and staff to develop a clear sense of what teaching and learning looks like in postsecondary settings. For example, postsecondary instructors can offer YouthBuild teachers explicit recommendations on how to develop assignments and curriculum that help students work toward clearly specified academic benchmarks.

Postsecondary partners can provide students with access to tutoring resources and practice placement tests in order to prepare to take college entry tests such as the COMPASS or Accuplacer, test out of developmental education, or test high enough to need only one developmental education course. In addition, partners can collaborate with YouthBuild programs to create dual-
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enrollment agreements so that students are exposed to postsecondary coursework while enrolled in the YouthBuild program.

In this chapter, we provide resources to help you work with a postsecondary partner to increase academic rigor. We start by introducing curriculum alignment practices that have helped YouthBuild programs and their postsecondary partners establish common goals and definitions of postsecondary readiness to plan for how to help students reach these benchmarks. Next, we discuss dual-enrollment as a promising strategy for acclimating students to the demands of postsecondary coursework. Finally, we discuss the role of assessment in measuring student progress and how to use this information to increase the overall quality and relevance of academic support provided throughout the YouthBuild program.

Curriculum Alignment Practices

Improving academic rigor and aligning YouthBuild curricula with postsecondary experiences will prepare students for authentic college-level coursework and reduce their need for remediation. Studies suggest that secondary students’ likelihood of entering postsecondary education and completing postsecondary credentials increases after engaging in intensive curriculum and instruction during secondary education.

Curricular alignment typically involves YouthBuild staff and postsecondary partners working together to analyze YouthBuild curricula relative to postsecondary and remedial-level course requirements, assignments, and required content knowledge. This process helps YouthBuild instructors plan curriculum around needed requirements and provides students with the right level of support.

YouthBuild programs are not the sole beneficiaries of curricular alignment. Postsecondary instructors and staff benefit from fully understanding the YouthBuild approach. YouthBuild instructors and staff can help postsecondary instructors and staff deepen their understanding and awareness of youth development principles and teaching practices that engage, inspire, and support first-generation, low-income students. These practices create authentic and caring classroom environments where mini-communities of adults and young people commit to each other’s well-being.

A great way to begin the curricular alignment process is to build a “postsecondary success committee” consisting of YouthBuild and postsecondary instructors and instructional deans. Once established, the group can meet and develop clear postsecondary readiness goals and think of concrete ways that YouthBuild can help students work toward these goals. For example, Portland YouthBuilders, through the advocacy of Portland Community College’s president, was able to convene academic deans, college and remedial level math instructors and conduct day-long retreats and follow-up meetings. In these meetings, they discuss a vision for college readiness and
brainstorm curricular pathways and instructional strategies. You can read about their process in detail in the next case study.

The following sections, Tips for Building a Postsecondary Success Committee and Strategies for Working with Postsecondary Staff to Align Curriculum offer tips and practices based on the successes of Portland YouthBuilders and other YouthBuild programs.

You can find detailed tips, sample agendas, and other resources to support your academic alignment efforts in the Academic Alignment Mini-Toolkit (http://tinyurl.com/Align767).

Tips for Building a Postsecondary Success Committee

Building a postsecondary success committee consisting of YouthBuild staff and educators, postsecondary instructors, and administrators is a promising way to engage in honest conversations about how well YouthBuild students are prepared.

When convening a postsecondary success committee, make sure to identify the right postsecondary instructors to be a part of your alignment team. Participating postsecondary instructors should demonstrate commitment to student success and use student-centered instructional techniques. Ask departmental deans or other high-level administrators to help you engage the right instructors.

During your alignment process, also make sure that you engage developmental English and Math instructors as well as college-level instructors. One of the goals of your alignment efforts is to provide students with the support needed to test out of developmental education. For students to master developmental education requirements, they should practice engaging in work required in college-level English and math courses.

Strategies to Align Curriculum

Once your success committee is in place, work with your partner to facilitate meetings and/or retreats with postsecondary and YouthBuild instructors. These meetings will provide space in which you can work together to define common goals, clarify desired student outcomes, and develop concrete strategies to align YouthBuild curriculum with postsecondary experiences.

Tips for Facilitating Successful Postsecondary Alignment Meetings in the Academic Alignment Mini Toolkit recommends activities when convening YouthBuild and PSE staff or faculty. These tips will make your alignment conversations more productive. The toolkit also offers a Sample Alignment Meeting Agenda that you can modify as you facilitate these meetings.

After your initial meeting, the postsecondary success committee may wish to review progress and challenges in the curriculum alignment process, meet regularly to discuss how things are going, and make suggestions for improvement. Staff at Portland YouthBuilders meet with Portland Community College instructors and deans three times a year to discuss progress, strategies, and challenges.
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CASE STUDY

Working with Postsecondary Partners to Align Curriculum with Postsecondary Expectations

Portland YouthBuilders collaborates with leaders and faculty within Portland Community College (PCC) to ensure that their courses and teaching methods promote students’ seamless transition into colleges, apprenticeships, and vocational or technical programs. As the result of this work, Portland YouthBuild instructors cultivated an intimate understanding of developmental and college-level coursework requirements (including content knowledge and soft skills) and have elevated the academic rigor of their courses.

Portland YouthBuilders kicked off their curriculum alignment efforts through a retreat with Portland Community College English and math faculty and the dean of academic instruction. During this retreat, PCC and Portland YouthBuilders instructors and administrators first identified specific academic and soft skills needed for postsecondary success. Once they established the vision of postsecondary readiness, instructors from both institutions convened into smaller groups, according to their respective disciplines, to discuss specific course requirements. During these conversations, PCC instructors shared their expectations of students in the areas of content-related academic skills, study skills, and non-cognitive skills. As a larger group, PCC and Portland YouthBuilders staff then engaged in an honest conversation regarding how well Portland YouthBuilders students were meeting these requirements. The conversation was informed by careful evaluation of various data points including former Portland YouthBuilders students’ PSE grades, samples of student work, developmental courses taken, and overall retention rates. Furthermore, they asked Portland YouthBuilders alumni currently enrolled in the college about the areas in which alumni felt they needed the most support.

The Portland YouthBuilders and PCC postsecondary success committee meets three times a year to continuously review and improve Portland YouthBuilders curricula in ways that support students’ transition into the community college. Since their initial meeting with the postsecondary success committee several years ago, Portland YouthBuilders academic instruction has evolved substantially. For instance, the Portland YouthBuilders has dramatically improved its writing instruction by making explicit the processes of critical thinking and expository and research-based writing in all areas of the program (including the construction component). The program also instituted an Introduction to College Algebra course that is explicitly aligned with PCC’s developmental math courses and the COMPASS placement test. Further, Portland YouthBuilders designed college-like course syllabi for all academic courses that teach students habits of reading, understanding course expectations, and planning ahead for deadlines. Over the last several years, Portland YouthBuilders staff report increased rigor, focus, and cohesiveness in their program.
Dual-Enrollment Opportunities

Dual-enrollment opportunities represent promising ways to expose students to postsecondary course requirements and culture. These strategies also create early momentum for students to enter postsecondary education with credits toward graduation and gain academic confidence. Students engage in dual-enrollment courses when they take courses offered or credited by the postsecondary institution while enrolled in the YouthBuild program. Courses are considered "dual-credit" when a student receives simultaneous academic credit for the course from both the college and the YouthBuild program.

The Dual Enrollment Mini-Toolkit (http://tinyurl.com/Dual84) describes various ways that you can collaborate with a postsecondary partner to create dual enrollment opportunities for YouthBuild students. We also provide tip sheets identifying ways that you can support students once they are dual-enrolled.

Working with a postsecondary institution to provide dual-enrollment opportunities is a promising starting point for YouthBuild programs in the beginning stages of a postsecondary partnership. As your partnership evolves, you can incorporate additional dual-credit opportunities that allow students to earn credits and credentials leading toward promising careers.

Before pursuing dual-enrollment opportunities, you should research your state’s dual enrollment policies to determine the best methods to provide student access to these courses. For example, your state may have specific age requirements, tuition policies, funding opportunities, and instructor certification requirements.

In addition, consider how you and your postsecondary partner will deliver dual enrollment or dual-credit opportunities to students. For instance, YouthBuild instructors (certified as adjuncts) can develop these courses and teach them on the YouthBuild campus or they can be taught by a postsecondary instructor on the YouthBuild campus. When choosing a dual-enrollment delivery structure, determine where the course will be taught, who will teach the course, and whether the course will be dual-credit or non-credit. The Dual-Enrollment Delivery Structures tool in the Dual Enrollment Mini-Toolkit describes ways that you can deliver these courses. The tool also provides key questions that programs leads should address with postsecondary partners when considering these opportunities.

Programs interested in dual enrollment should also identify which types of courses best suit students’ needs: developmental English and/or math courses, vocational or certificate courses, college level courses, or college preparation courses. Be sure to assess students’ preferences and needs carefully when identifying appropriate coursework.

Lastly, we recommend that you and your partner plan appropriate student supports to ensure students’ success once enrolled in dual enrollment courses. Supports may include transportation to and from the postsecondary campus, grants and stipends to assist book and other classroom material purchases, tuition assistance, and tutoring.
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YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School and Community College of Philadelphia’s Dual-Enrollment Efforts

In 2011, YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School (YPCS) launched a dual-enrollment program in collaboration with the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) to offer students two credit-bearing, high-interest general studies courses: Spanish 101 and Art Computer Graphics. Engaging students in these courses provided an important opportunity to expose students to postsecondary coursework.

YPCS decided that these courses were promising due to their use of high engagement teaching methods (including classroom dialogue and project-based learning) and applicability to all majors. Students paid for these courses with their AmeriCorps education grant awards.

YPCS helped students succeed within these courses by providing support before and during students’ course enrollment. Before students officially begin the courses, YouthBuild Philadelphia instructors and staff provided a two-week orientation to articulate course expectations, emphasize postsecondary study habits, and promote postsecondary-success behaviors. During this time, students also visited and became familiar with CCP’s campus.

Once the course began, a YPCS staff member provided students with in-class support while also helping with financial aid and Fall registration. YBPCS also offers a one hour tutoring lab after every class to assist students with homework and course assignment, as well as school supplies and books.
Using Assessments to Improve Student Learning

Successful academic alignment work also requires strengthening assessment of student learning in ways that align with the demonstration of skills and knowledge necessary for postsecondary access and completion. The purposes and uses of assessment are three fold: 1) to create a more complete and nuanced understanding of student learning; 2) to inform instructional practices and other support strategies in a timely way; and 3) to ensure that assessment data can begin to demonstrate that more students are fully prepared for college-level work.

Assessments should reflect a comprehensive mix of basic skill assessments, classroom assessments, employability skills measures, student work portfolios, and college placement tests. In this guide, we do not go into detail about some of the more nuanced types and uses of assessments, as these efforts require substantial support and planning. However, we highlight two types of assessments that are critical for supporting students’ postsecondary readiness: rubrics and college placement exams.

Assessment Rubrics

A rubric is an assessment tool that lists the criteria instructors use to evaluate student work. These are powerful tools for assessing students’ academic progress toward postsecondary readiness. They clearly articulate the skills, knowledge, and levels of understanding that students need to engage successfully in postsecondary level work.

Rubrics typically contain detailed descriptions of components of quality assignments and characteristics that make up each level of quality (e.g. excellent, good, fair, and poor) for a particular assignment. For example, YouthBuild educators have worked with postsecondary instructors to develop a clear set of criteria of what constitutes a strong argumentative essay and built coursework around providing supports for students to develop these skills. Rubrics help students think, learn, and produce high quality postsecondary work. They also provide a description of the desirable characteristics to pursue and the pitfalls to avoid while emphasizing the goals and focus of each assignment.

When developing assessment rubrics, collaborate with your postsecondary partner to identify clear indicators of quality postsecondary work within the subject areas that you teach. See the Curriculum Alignment Practices section in this chapter to learn about engaging in these discussions with postsecondary instructors.

You also want to ensure that your rubrics are high quality and coupled with appropriate instructional support. There are many free resources available on the web to support your rubric development efforts, as well as tips to help you couple your rubrics with quality instruction. You can find links to free and high quality assessment rubric resources in the Free Assessment Rubric Resources (http://tinyurl.com/assess8) tool.

Have students actively use the rubrics to assess their work and the work of their peers. This process will help students internalize the criteria of quality academic work and develop a strong command of these criteria through practice over time.
Preparing Students for Postsecondary Placement Tests

Postsecondary placement exams are one of the most commonly-used assessments to gauge students’ postsecondary readiness. Postsecondary institutions use these tests to evaluate students’ academic skills and determine if students need developmental coursework before entering college level courses. These tests include Compass, Accuplacer, ACT, and SAT.

We describe common placement tests within the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement Tests</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuplacer or COMPASS</td>
<td>Community and Technical Colleges</td>
<td>Postsecondary institutions typically use test scores to evaluate students reading, writing, and math skills and to determine whether or not developmental course work is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>Four Year Institutions or Universities</td>
<td>The most widely used college admissions test. Viewed by university admissions officers to assess students qualification for admission (in addition to other application materials).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Four Year Institutions or Universities</td>
<td>Viewed by university admissions officers to assess students’ qualification for admission (in addition to other application materials).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most community colleges either use the Accuplacer or the Compass to assess students’ needs for developmental education coursework. Almost 60 percent of students enrolling in community colleges require at least some developmental coursework, thus lengthening the timeframe in which they can expect to graduate while reducing the likelihood that they will complete their postsecondary degrees or certifications. Ideally, YouthBuild programs should aim to have students bypass developmental coursework altogether or enter higher level developmental courses. When students place into developmental coursework, YouthBuild educators should partner with developmental education instructors to make teaching and learning approaches as strong as possible for participating students.

**Important:** Students’ preparation to test into college placement does not necessarily translate into college readiness. If staff teach and remediate toward college placement tests alone, programs will send graduates into postsecondary settings dramatically underprepared to succeed in college-level math courses. While YouthBuild can benefit from using online assessment programs intended to predict success on college placement tests, these tools must not constitute the primary means of assessing students’ math learning and understanding.

You can find resources to support student postsecondary placement test preparation in the Postsecondary Placement Test Preparation Mini-Toolkit (http://tinyurl.com/placetest8). Here we provide links to fee-based and free postsecondary placement test resources, tips for successfully preparing students for placement tests, as well as links that more authentically measure students’ postsecondary competencies.
**CASE STUDY**

**YouthBuild McLean County Prepares Students for the COMPASS**

YouthBuild McLean County has taken great strides to prepare students for the COMPASS test (required by its postsecondary partner, Heartland Community College) in addition to helping students develop broader competencies not addressed on the test. To prepare students specifically for the COMPASS test, the program implemented the A+dvancer college readiness program, a fee-based computer software program that targets specific math and English skills. The YouthBuild program also contracted a math tutor to work one-on-one with all students.

While tutoring and software help students develop key skills to be successful in the COMPASS, the YouthBuild program recognizes that students still need to develop foundational skills for college such as acceptable behavior, time management, completing college-level work, and maintaining high levels of attendance. To minimize these barriers for students, YouthBuild McLean County aligned its academic curriculum with postsecondary standards, creating a “college like” instructional culture integrated into the weekly program schedule.
Online Resources

Websites
States’ Dual Enrollment Policies: http://tinyurl.com/sdep4312

Tools
Academic Alignment Mini-Toolkit: http://tinyurl.com/Align767
Dual Enrollment Mini-Toolkit: http://tinyurl.com/Dual84
Postsecondary Placement Test Preparation Mini-Toolkit: http://tinyurl.com/placetest8
Free Assessment Rubric Resources: http://tinyurl.com/assess8