



MISSOURI HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY  
**BRIDGES TO SUCCESS**

# WHITE PAPER:

# ACADEMIC READINESS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19



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# CURRENT STATUS

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2020 has been a trying time for all sectors of higher education – for the students as well as faculty and staff working within higher education institutions. Ordinarily, any discussions surrounding academic readiness would consist of evaluating content readiness and other indicators, such as high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores. However, given the climate of uncertainty created by COVID-19, issues that students have always dealt with have come to the forefront in a way that is impacting their academic readiness to a much more pronounced degree than in typical years. Since all in higher education are affected, either directly or indirectly, by equity issues, the discussion surrounding academic readiness is fitting for this series of white papers on equity. In order to adequately address the issue of academic readiness, the following measures should be emphasized – corequisite coursework, summer bridge programs, ACT reform, and a renewed focus on student mental health.

A policy brief released by ACT showed a variety of statistical analyses regarding the effects of the pandemic on ACT scores, such as the pivot to online learning, variations in school start dates, and the possibility of offering make-up ACT tests. While each model shows a different scenario in regards to predicted composite ACT score, the models highlight that ACT scores are tied to the amount of time students spend in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> This makes sense, as ACT scores are one of the most widely relied upon methods of determining college readiness. Situations such as the current pandemic that remove students from classrooms for long enough to impact their scores could potentially cause students to appear less academically ready than they are in reality. Last year's Report on Equity showed that there were significant disparities in median ACT score along the lines of race as well, making any conversation surrounding the role of ACT in admissions intrinsically equity related.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, ACT subscores are often used to determine whether students are placed in credit-bearing gateway courses or remedial courses upon postsecondary enrollment. Students who are placed in non-credit-bearing prerequisite remediation end up burdened with the cost of extra courses. In a worst case scenario, this could delay their graduation. While the corequisite model of remediation, which places students directly in the gateway course with an additional lab section for as-needed support, has proven to be successful where it has been implemented in Missouri, it is still in the process of being scaled up across institutions and content areas. These corequisites can help students avoid being placed into those noncredit-bearing prerequisite courses that their ACT subscores would potentially require. However, this has implications for equity in the state of Missouri. According to the recently released Report on College and Career Readiness, Black Missourians and working-age Missourians are more likely to take traditional, non-credit bearing prerequisite courses rather than the corequisite model. Any measures taken to improve academic readiness should address this issue as well.<sup>3</sup>

To predict academic performance when many American students have spent an extended period of time outside the classroom, some researchers have turned to a preexisting phenomenon that often derails academic readiness – the “summer slide.” While this usually affects younger learners more severely than students in the secondary setting, the consequences are more pronounced when it comes to math proficiency.<sup>4</sup> A study conducted by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) estimates that students returning to an in-person classroom setting in fall 2020 would only have kept 50 percent of their math gains made over the previous year.<sup>5</sup> While the study did not have high school students as its focus, one would expect a similar trend to be observed there as well, and would perhaps be exacerbated when dealing with higher-level math courses.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, J., Mattern, K., & Camara, W. (2020, May). Predicting the Impact of COVID-19 School Closures on ACT Test Scores: Methods and Considerations for States and Districts. Retrieved October 01, 2020, from <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1828-covid-impact-2020-05.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> 2019. *Missouri Higher Education Equity Project*. [online] Available at: <<https://dhewd.mo.gov/documents/2019EquityReport.pdf>> [Accessed 6 November 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, 2020. *Report On College And Career Readiness*.

# FINDING SOLUTIONS

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The conversations surrounding how to best proceed when assessing student readiness have taken place with these realities in mind. An interview from the Harvard Gazette with Richard Weissbourd shows the need to move toward a more equitable and empathetic means of determining college readiness.<sup>6</sup> Weissbourd conjures a hypothetical scenario of students juggling coursework with other responsibilities such as working part-time and taking care of family members. Because of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, it is easy to imagine that more students are dealing with such external pressures now more than ever. Recognizing these external pressures that many students face should not end with COVID-19. Rather, it should entirely re-contextualize and redefine “readiness” in a way that is more responsive to student realities, both academic and personal.

One of the possible solutions to this problem posed by Weissbourd in the interview is a new means of evaluating readiness. Known as the Mastery Transcript Consortium, this solution aims to evaluate students on a variety of skills and competencies rather than solely by traditional metrics such as GPA and SAT/ACT score.<sup>7</sup> The stated goal of the initiative – to capture what traditional transcripts cannot – may be used as a framework to better ascertain the college readiness of Missouri’s students.

Summer bridge programs are also an identified solution to gaps in academic readiness. A brief from the Community College Journal of Research and Practice addresses the various ways in which summer bridge programs contribute to making students more academically ready, such as professional development opportunities and proactive advising.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, while the brief didn’t use the language of corequisite remediation, it described the model as an effective means of improving academic readiness. In addition to summer bridge programs, according to *Inside Higher Ed*, some universities are alleviating the gap in learning by offering a selection of online courses for free.<sup>9</sup>

An article from the Education Strategy Group highlights the need to address these readiness gaps – both in general and especially given the academic disruption caused by COVID-19, by focusing more on programs similar to summer bridge programs and reforms in remedial education.<sup>10</sup> An approach like this, in conjunction with scaling up existing practices such as the aforementioned shift towards corequisite remediation, could potentially better capture the state of college readiness.

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<sup>4</sup> Von Hippel, P. T. (2020, July 14). Is Summer Learning Loss Real? Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://www.educationnext.org/is-summer-learning-loss-real-how-i-lost-faith-education-research-results/>

<sup>5</sup> Kuhfeld, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2020, April). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. Retrieved September 29, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Walsh, C. (2020, July 06). How college admissions might change in the wake of the pandemic. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/07/how-college-admissions-might-change-in-the-wake-of-the-pandemic/>

<sup>7</sup> Mastery Transcript Consortium® (MTC). (n.d.). Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://mastery.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Kallison, J. (2011, November 30). Effectiveness of Summer Bridge Programs in Enhancing College Readiness. Retrieved October 02, 2020, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ971583>

<sup>9</sup> Insidehighered.com. 2020. Colleges Offer Free Summer Courses. [online] Available at: <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/16/colleges-offer-free-summer-courses>> [Accessed 4 November 2020].

<sup>10</sup> Director, R., Reyna, R., & Director, S. (2020, May 14). Accelerate Recovery: Stop the College Readiness COVID Slide. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <http://edstrategy.org/accelerate-recovery-stop-the-college-readiness-covid-slide/>

# FINDING SOLUTIONS

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An analysis conducted by California State University's sociology department advocates for a *social stress and social support model*. This model takes into account the varying circumstances students are likely to encounter by regularly conducting surveys and questionnaires on student mental health and encouraging faculty members such as professors and advisors to take an active approach when interacting with their students regarding these issues. This is an apt solution not only for dealing with the unique stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to properly address student concerns in the future.<sup>11</sup> The results of the study showed that academic performance among the students was dramatically affected by the level of perceived support. When students felt their institution and faculty were supportive of their academic endeavors, not only did academic performance increase, but fewer students reported having difficulties concentrating. It's worth noting, as this white paper series has an overall focus on equity, the authors of this study found these benefits would especially impact Black, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students.

No discussion about academic readiness during a pandemic would be comprehensive without addressing the looming specter of mental health among college students. Studies on college students conducted over the past year have shown a sharp increase in mental health issues. This was shown in a recent Kaiser Health Foundation study which reported that 56 percent of adults in the U.S. reported developing mental health issues as a result of COVID-19, and 18-29 year-olds made up the largest part of that group.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the percentage of students reporting financial instability has increased dramatically since the beginning of 2020. These extenuating circumstances may have an adverse effect on academic performance, but the flipside of this statement is true as well. An analysis of one of the world's largest school-based mental health programs found that mental health was a significant predictor of future academic performance, and that catering to student mental health needs as well as academic needs helps further improve academic outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

Even with the effects of summer break to serve as a proxy for time students spend outside the classroom, there is still much to learn regarding the overall effects on academic readiness that will require future data to fully understand. However, given the data currently available regarding the effectiveness of measures in place – such as corequisite remediation and summer bridge programs, the state of academic readiness as this pandemic wears on will hopefully improve as much as it can. By catering to students' needs in these ways, the potential gap in academic performance caused by the pandemic may be mitigated.

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<sup>11</sup> Stemper, C., Alemi, Q., Sanchez, M., & Ingram, S. (2020). Examining the impact of Covid-19-related disruptions, dislocations and stressors on the academic performance of undergraduates at a diverse public university. Department of Sociology: California State University, 1-29.

<sup>12</sup> Kirzinger A, Hamel L, Muñana C, Kearney A, Brodie M. KFF Health Tracking Poll - Late April 2020: Coronavirus, social distancing, and contact tracing. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-health-tracking-poll-late-april-2020-economic-and-mental-health-impacts-of-coronavirus/>. Updated April 24, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, J., Guzmán, J., McCarthy, A., Squicciarini, A., George, M., Canenguez, K., Jellinek, M. (2015, April). Mental health predicts better academic outcomes: A longitudinal study of elementary school students in Chile. Retrieved October 08, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4443903/>