

# Evaluation of the California Community College Linked Learning Initiative

Second-Year Report  
Executive Summary



# Introduction

In the 21st century economy, postsecondary education is the gateway to a viable career and adequate earnings. Yet, in California, neither the K–12 education system nor the postsecondary education system has addressed fully its responsibility for ensuring successful student transitions from high school to postsecondary education. As a result, California’s public education system is not meeting the college and career readiness needs of many of its most vulnerable residents. The majority of California high school graduates who go on to postsecondary education first enroll in a community college, but less than half of these students go on to earn a certificate, complete a degree, or transfer to a four-year degree program. In recent years, low-income students, first-generation college students, Latino, and African-American students, in particular, have had very low postsecondary completion rates.

Low-income and first-generation college students encounter many obstacles to their success in postsecondary education. The gap between K–12 and community college educational systems is a key source of the barriers they face. On one side, there is evidence that K–12 systems are falling short in providing all students with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and mindsets they need to be college and career ready. On the other side, we see community college systems hobbled by ineffective placement and basic skills remediation practices and by inadequate student guidance and support systems. These are real problems and areas for improvement on both sides of the K–12 and college systems gap, but working in isolation, neither side can address fully the multiple barriers that prevent students from making successful high school to postsecondary transitions. Only by working together can community college and K–12 education systems fill the gaps and develop coherent strategies for providing students with needed supports at all stages of the transition from high school to and through community college.

In 2011, to help close the gap between California’s K–12 and community college systems, The James Irvine Foundation funded the Career Ladders Project to create the California Community College Linked Learning Initiative (CCCLLI). The goal of CCCLLI is to extend the Linked Learning approach into postsecondary education. In 2012, the Career Ladders Project chose three community colleges to serve as hubs for CCCLLI model development and implementation—Contra Costa College, Pasadena City College, and Sacramento City College.<sup>1</sup> Each of these hub colleges partnered with a local Linked Learning K–12 district to work together to improve support systems for students’ transitions to postsecondary education. From 2012 through 2014, SRI International evaluated the implementation of CCCLLI in the three hub college demonstration sites. This report summarizes key findings from our analysis of data collected during the second year of the CCCLLI evaluation.

## The CCCLLI approach: Extending the Linked Learning approach into college.

With guidance from the Career Ladders Project, the CCCLLI colleges worked together with their K–12 partners to align and extend Linked Learning pathways from high school into and through community college. Each of the three CCCLLI hub colleges created pathways in a different industry sector and each built upon its own distinctive programmatic strengths. Although each site developed its own unique plans and strategies, all three sites focused their efforts on a combination of transitional support strategies to improve students’ readiness for college-level coursework, to align high school and college career pathway programs of study, and to enhance personalized counseling and student services supports. More specifically,

<sup>1</sup> The Career Ladders Project also awarded a number of smaller CCCLLI grants to partner community colleges to form networks of college career-technical education programs all working in the same industry sector as each of the three CCCLLI hub colleges. The CCCLLI work by partner colleges was not included in the SRI evaluation.

- The CCCLLI hub colleges worked with K–12 district partners to implement strategies like early assessment, dual enrollment, and summer bridge programs to strengthen students' academic readiness before they entered the college pathway program of study.
- The CCCLLI hub colleges aligned college career-technical programs of study with Linked Learning pathways in partner high schools.
- The CCCLLI college and K–12 teams used a wide range of strategies to expand and enhance personalized student supports like early college registration and expanded college counseling services for high school students, summer bridge programs, and student cohort class scheduling and dedicated counseling and other student services in the college pathways.

## CCCLLI Cross-level Collaboration

In the first year of the SRI evaluation, we identified three key barriers to effective college and K–12 collaboration: difficulties creating a shared vision and common goals across systems, limited sharing of data, and logistical constraints on cross-level collaboration. In the second year of the evaluation, we learned that the CCCLLI teams faced their greatest challenges in implementing programmatic strategies that required cross-level (college and K–12) sharing of resources and sharing of responsibility (such as aligning college and K–12 expectations and supports for students' academic readiness, implementing dual-enrollment options, and coordinating college and K–12 counseling resources). We also saw evidence of the importance of active systems-level leadership engagement, distributed leadership, and interdisciplinary collaboration in CCCLLI communities of practice. For example, we found:

- Active engagement of systems-level leadership is an axiomatic but too often unrealized requirement of cross-level collaboration. Leadership turnover and inattention were limiting factors for cross-level collaboration in the CCCLLI sites, because direct action by college and K–12 systems leaders was a key support for cross-level collaboration.
- A well-established distributed leadership structure can offset barriers of time and organizational boundaries to support college and K–12 collaboration. The CCCLLI sites found that a team approach to leadership was an effective way to avoid putting too much burden on one or two CCCLLI champions. The distributed leadership model also mitigated against leadership turnover and scheduling constraints for cross-level meetings and expanded the capacity and access to resources available to the CCCLLI cross-level teams.
- A strong, interdepartmental faculty learning community can provide a forum for ongoing discussion and resolution of disagreements on curricular and instructional priorities that divide academic and career-technical faculty within colleges. Differences between academic and career-technical faculty priorities are also a barrier to cross-level faculty collaboration. The robustness of the disciplines as the basic structural element of higher education institutions cannot and should not be underestimated as a potential barrier to the CCCLLI vision of integrated academic and career-technical high school to college career pathway programs of study.

## CCCLLI Program Development

CCCLLI was an opportunity for community colleges and their K–12 district partners to experiment with application of the core components of the Linked Learning approach in ways that would support more seamless student transitions from high school into and through community college. The CCCLLI teams focused their work on three of the four components of Linked Learning and developed a range of strategies to support student's academic readiness for college-level coursework, to align high school and college pathway programs of study, and to enhance personalized student supports. Across all three areas

of the CCCLLI work, the college and K–12 teams were most effective when high-level leadership was actively engaged, making it possible to integrate transition support strategies with college-wide and K–12 district-wide systems and resources. The experiences of the CCCLLI teams in each site also revealed some key lessons related to the effectiveness of strategies within each area of work:

- The CCCLLI teams were successful in taking initial steps to address the goal of strengthening students' academic readiness for college, particularly with early assessment, dual enrollment, and summer bridge programs. However, the unfinished state of broader systems-level reform of academic standards and assessment policies and practices, especially reform of basic skills assessment and placement in developmental English and mathematics courses at the colleges, was a key contextual constraint on progress on the academic readiness goal.
- CCCLLI teams made effective use of pathway mapping as a strategy for aligning high school and college career pathway programs of study. The pathway maps also had value as a means of communicating the objectives and value of the CCCLLI pathways to high school and college faculty and staff. Judging from difficulties CCCLLI college pathways experienced in recruiting high school students from aligned Linked Learning pathways, the CCCLLI teams may need to develop additional strategies to communicate more effectively the value of college pathways to prospective students.
- Across the wide variety of strategies adopted by the CCCLLI teams to enhance personalized student supports through the postsecondary transition there were many notable successes, including enhancement of college counseling services offered to high school students, early college enrollment of students prior to high school graduation, and integrating the first-year CCCLLI college pathway program with broader efforts at each college to provide a strong first-year student counseling, tutoring, and student services. The Linked Learning strategy of creating small student cohorts with common course schedules to foster a more personalized and supportive learning experience was not as effective in the college context. All three CCCLLI colleges found that it was advantageous to students and faculty alike to allow for more flexibility in student course scheduling and more heterogeneous classes (mixing in some more mature students with students straight out of high school).

## CCCLLI Student Experience

The SRI research team collected descriptive data on characteristics, coursetaking, and course outcomes of students enrolled in the CCCLLI college pathways. We also conducted focus group interviews with a small number of CCCLLI pathway students. The nature of the available data prohibits any discussion of the *impacts* of participation in pathways in the sense of a cause and effect relationship between the programmatic treatment and the outcomes for students. The principal value of this descriptive analysis is to identify aspects of the student experience that may be in most need of attention and improvement. The descriptive analyses indicate:

- Rates of placement in college developmental basic skills English and mathematics courses and course failure rates among the first two CCCLLI student cohorts were high, suggesting a continuing need for intensive work on strategies to improve students' academic readiness.
- Data on CCCLLI student rates of course success, grades, and credit accumulation, in combination with evidence from student comments in focus group interviews, reveal a mixed picture of the likelihood of college success among the second cohort of CCCLLI college students. Many students struggled to keep up with the demands of the CCCLLI pathway programs of study, suggesting a need for additional work on improvements to curriculum, instructional quality, and supplemental academic supports.

- In interviews, CCCLLI students and faculty both pointed out that first-year college pathway students need assistance in developing college success skills, such as good study habits, effective time management, self-awareness, the ability to seek out help when needed, the ability to set academic and personal goals, and persistence in efforts to achieve them. Together, these data support the maintenance of a strong counseling component during the first year of college (and perhaps after) to help students adjust to college-level expectations and improve their chances for college success.

## Conclusions and Implications

The model demonstration phase of CCCLLI was a useful context for exploring questions related to the potential collective impact of community college and K–12 systems alignment on regional industry, education, and workforce development ecosystems (such as those envisioned by the California Career Pathways Trust initiative). Two general findings from the CCCLLI evaluation seem particularly relevant for application to regional cross-level and cross-sector collaborations to promote more seamless and successful student transitions from high school to college and career.

- First, **Linked Learning pathways are not pipelines.** The goal of Linked Learning is to keep educational and career opportunities open and not to force high school or college students to make an early choice to pursue an occupation in a particular industry sector. Ideally, the goal of regional collaboration will be to give students a wide range of high-quality college career pathways to choose among.
- Second, **seamless systems are needed to support seamless transitions.** The CCCLLI experience shows that cross-level collaboration to blur the line between K–12 and college education systems is an important first step toward better systems to support students' postsecondary transitions. The CCCLLI demonstration project also illustrates the difficulties of cross-level collaboration. The CCCLLI teams faced many challenges in building cross-level communities of practice. Looking ahead, it is clear that the cross-level collaboration experience of the CCCLLI teams, and their work on aligning and extending Linked Learning pathways from high school into community college, will offer valuable guidance for regional efforts to develop systems of Linked Learning pathways from high school through community college. Creating such seamless systems will be a big step toward the goals of more seamless student transitions to postsecondary education and stronger pathways to 21st century careers.



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