

UP FOR THE CHALLENGE: ONRAMPS TAKES AIM AT COLLEGE READINESS

What motivates the members of the OnRamps team? Asked about the career and personal paths that led to their current positions, the four individuals recounted a narrative with a common theme of discovering a passion aligned to OnRamps' vision of accelerating post-secondary success. The Harvard postdoc who researched ways to deliver pedagogical innovation to the masses; the teacher and University of Texas at Austin doctoral student with a passion for educational reform and project-based learning; the career counselor who helped students successfully navigate higher education in route to their careers; and the teacher and educational policy worker who sums up the team's collective investment in the OnRamps mission, saying, "I feel a strong sense of personal responsibility to make sure that high school students are ready for college when we turn them loose" - Each of these four individuals jumped at the opportunity to bring their passion to bear on the mission of OnRamps and confront a notoriously stubborn problem: college completion.

In February of 2009, President Obama articulated a goal for the US to resume its place as the world-leader in college completion, a distinction it lost almost 3 decades ago. Yet, the 41 percent graduation rate that currently ranks the US at 16th among countries in the number of adults holding a degree is the same rate that produced more graduates than any other country in the 1980s. So while the college-completion rate in the US moves along at a snail's pace, other nations grow at a steady clip.

One of the driving forces behind this stagnation is the high rate at which college enrollees fail to complete a degree. Although more high school students than ever attend college, only seven out of every 10 - just over half - will earn a degree. An even more troubling disparity exists among the increasing number of degree-seeking low-income, minority, and first-generation students. Despite numerous reform efforts, a persistent achievement gap between these underrepresented student groups and their more advantaged peers remains.

In part, college student success gaps may be related to high school curricula that often fall short of the rigor of college-level work. Students too often enter college without the content knowledge or academic skills to succeed. According to Megan Parry, the OnRamps Partnership Coordinator, “deep conceptual knowledge is one of the big differences between what’s expected in high school and what’s expected in college, so giving students a taste of content on that level is the big thing that OnRamps offers that they won’t get elsewhere.”

OnRamps offers an authentic experience of the authenticity of college-level work because, unlike other programs offered to high school students, faculty at the University of Texas at Austin develop the curricula. Inherently, this takes a lot of the guesswork out of addressing the type of skills and knowledge that students need to succeed in college. It also addresses one of the core obstacles to closing the achievement gap addressed by Robert Lapiner, Associate Vice-Chancellor for Global Continuing Education at New York University. At a Congress Advisory Committee hearing in September of 2011, Lapiner said, “impediments to success reach back to the unevenness among earlier educational experiences the students have had.” Accordingly, OnRamps provides students from high schools and community colleges across the state of Texas with coursework that reflects the type of work that they can expect to encounter at the post-secondary level.

Not only do OnRamps students experience college-level rigor, but they can also earn college credit in the process. A 2012 report by nonprofit agency Jobs for the Future underscores the significance of this opportunity, suggesting that Texas high school students double their probability of earning a degree by taking just one dual-credit course.

Unlike other approaches, though, OnRamps offers what Director Julie Schell refers to as “a holistic approach” to dual-credit, one that takes into account the latest research on how students learn and the changing needs of the 21st Century student. OnRamps Research and Professional Development Coordinator, Tara Craig, expanded on the needs of the 21st Century students. “When I was in school, all ‘knowledge’ was housed in the school or held by your teacher or the library,” said Craig. “In this age of information,

competitive students need to know how to learn independently. They need to be able to research content and not depend completely on an instructor to tell them what they 'need to know,' but instead explore and figure out what they need."

"Being able to find out how to solve a problem they have never seen before is what they will need to master as college students. This is a skill we are working to help develop through OnRamps," says Schell.

Recognizing this need for students to be self-directed learners, not only in college, but also in their future careers, OnRamps employs a blended learning approach, allowing students to access online materials independently without losing out on the unique benefits offered through face-to-face interaction with the teacher. So, the "holistic approach" to dual-credit combines factors that have been empirically-validated to improve student learning and college completion. "We align with the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, use relevant, innovative pedagogies such as project-based and discovery learning, are linked to academic departments at UT Austin, provide teacher training and support, and integrate technology in ways that are pedagogically sound," said Schell.

Now in the pilot stage, OnRamps hopes to expand both its course offerings and in the number of students it reaches in the coming years. Part of this process and part of what makes OnRamps unique is that teachers will play an active role in nurturing this growth. "We see teachers as partners in innovation and are working to cultivate a cadre of instructors in the state of Texas who are prepared to teach high school courses at a level of rigor that will truly prepare their students to succeed in subsequent college coursework," said Schell. So while the OnRamps team prepares teachers to deliver OnRamps courses to their students, they also invite their ongoing feedback and suggestions towards further refining and strengthening the OnRamps model. The team is unanimous in their enthusiasm for partnering with teachers who will not only deliver OnRamps to students, but also bring their own strengths and ideas to bear on advancing the OnRamps initiative even further

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“We love to get really good feedback and thoughtful ideas for improvement about what worked and what didn’t,” said Project Manager, Emily Wade. “We want teachers who are innovative, not just open to ideas we give them, but also with ideas of their own and ways that they can help us to improve OnRamps.”

OnRamps is looking for partners like these to join our network of innovative teachers. OnRamps prepares teachers to teach rigorous, dual-credit coursework in Computer Science, English Language Arts, Pre-Calculus, and Statistics. Contact OnRamps Partnership Coordinator Megan Parry at megan.parry@austin.utexas.edu or <http://onramps.org/request-information/> to learn more.

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