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MCC says high school grads are ill prepared for college

By: John Karas



It is a disturbing, but growing problem at institutions of higher learning everywhere.

Only 60 percent of high school graduates entering Manchester Community College can handle English courses at the college level, says MCC English professor Steven Straight. And data from the college's placement tests have East Hartford High School graduates faring worse: Two thirds need remedial English classes with some EHHS graduates needing as many as four semesters of developmental-level English courses to have a chance of success at the college level, according to MCC instructors.

"It's a major problem for us," Straight said during an interview at his office last week, "because EHHS is one of the main feeder schools for MCC. So my division director, Joanne Russel, and I met with [East Hartford superintendent of schools] Dr. Martinez and her assistant and her curriculum specialist and we talked about having more collaboration between English teachers here and English teachers in their system to make sure that students know what to expect when they enter college."

On Sept. 19, Straight will present the college's part of the story to members of the English Department at EHHS hoping to offer them an idea of what the requirements of college English are - and how they can better prepare students.

"We will talk about the placement process here [at MCC];" Straight said "[because] it seems most teachers don't know much about what we are looking for. I will hand them a typical assignment and then a good response from a student. And I will concentrate on the top level of developmental English - the equivalent of the senior year high school - because our students have to get a 'C' or better in that class to be ready for college classes."

For his part, Straight relates he would like some insight into what upper level high school students know about college, because his experience is that many don't have a clear concept at all about what college is all about.

"Is it going to be more like high school?' 'Is it going to be some foreign being?'" he asked with a smile. "Is it a real college?"

"What they will find is that with the increase in reciprocity between MCC and UConn and MCC and Eastern/Southern/Western/Central more people are seeing MCC as an inexpensive way to get two years of college before they transfer into a four-year school. And we transfer people everywhere including the Ivies. I think that some students find that it's tough when they get here. Lots of assignments, lots of reading. Expectations are high because our department is uniformly on the side of 'raise your expectations and you'll get better results.'"

Another thing that they will see when they get to college is that that suddenly all of the responsibility is on them to show up for classes and do the work, Straight said. "Teachers aren't going to chase after them. It's a major adjustment and I don't know what they know about that," he said.

This is exactly the kind of discussion she was hoping for, says East Hartford superintendent of schools Dr. Martinez. She said she first approached MCC President Jonathan Daube with the idea to increase the collaboration between EHHS and the college.

"This is the perfect opportunity for MCC and EH public schools to continue their relationship by working collaboratively to increase the number of East Hartford students who will be on credit courses instead of remedial classes," she said. "Right now we have many students that go on remedial classes because they don't have the knowledge of what is expected of them."

By helping students be more prepared for college courses, Martinez points out, the program will not only help students avoid the cost of attending remedial classes - currently at about \$350 per credit - it should also cut down the dropout rate. "Many students get discouraged in remedial classes and quit college," she explains. Initially, she said, Straight will be working with EHHS English Department Head Ann Cocchiola to analyze the distribution of EHHC graduates at MCC placement exams and discuss the goals the two institutions have for reading and writing courses - something that might also help with the effort to hike CMT scores in English.

But a next phase could have even higher goals, Dr. Martinez said.

"Maybe we could send our children to visit MCC to give them an idea about what college is and even start them exploring their career options," she said. "Rotary is doing a tremendous job in our Middle School by bringing in professionals every year to talk with the kids about their jobs. This year they brought more than 70 speakers. But I would like to start even earlier. Middle class parents talk to their kids when they are in kindergarten about their future careers and their educational goals. I want all of our kids to have that kind of exposure. Kids that find out what they want to do start developing goals of what they need to do."

Straight said that MCC is open to any idea that would help area schools better prepare their students to meet college demands.

The real success of the program will be if it develops into an ongoing collaboration with meetings between the teachers of the college and the teachers in local high schools. Out of all the school systems in the area, East Hartford High is the one that has already embraced the idea.

"It looks like East Hartford will have that the biggest program so far," said Straight.