

BACK ON TRACK THROUGH COLLEGE: SUPPORTING GED STUDENTS' SUCCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Restore Education, a Back on Track Through College program transforms former dropouts into college students, efficiently preparing them for the GED while building their college-readiness skills and supporting them to earn college credit. Jobs for the Future's [Back on Track Through College Designs](#) represent the next generation of schools, programs, and pathways that reengage youth and young adults who are off track to graduation or disconnected from school and work. The three-phases of the Back on Track model— Phase 1: Enriched Preparation, Phase 2: Postsecondary Bridging, and Phase 3: First-year Support—put youth and young adults on a path to achieving their postsecondary and career aspirations. In the following, we describe how Restore Education strategically uses its limited resources to deliver all three phases of the Back on Track model.

A DUAL STRATEGY: SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO EARN A GED AND BUILD COLLEGE READINESS

Restore Education offers one-on-one and small-group tutoring, along with videos and other technological tools, to provide high-dosage, flexible test preparation that helps students tackle the GED and college placement tests. At the same time, students take their first college course, *Introduction to Sociology*, where they get the enriched preparation that builds their academic knowledge, skills, and college-ready behaviors. Restore Education students enroll in this eight-week college course *while* working toward their GED.¹

RESTORE EDUCATION SNAPSHOT

- > **Student body:** Restore Education serves students ages 16-25 who have dropped out of high school. Their students tend to be on the older side of the range—the average age of their students is 19. Approximately half of their students enter with 9th-10th grade level skills and the other half have closer to 11th or 12th grade skills and/or may lack just the TAKS test (the TX high-stakes exam).
- > **Three-phases of program offerings:**
 - » **Combined Phase 1: Enriched Preparation and 2: Postsecondary Bridging**
Upon joining Restore Education, students enroll in their first college class, *Introduction to Sociology*, taught at San Antonio College. At the same time, students work toward passing the GED and the ACCUPLACER (the placement test used by the college). Students in the Passport Program are working on all three elements: pass the GED, get college ready, and earn college credit.
 - » **Phase 3: First Year Support**
Students in the Compass Program have their GED and earned passing scores on the ACCUPLACER. They receive continued support from Restore Education as they enroll in subsequent courses toward an Associate's degree after completing *Introduction to Sociology*.
- > **Goals:** Restore Education works to ensure all program graduates leave with a high school diploma, prepared for and connected to college.
- > **Outcomes:** Since Restore Education opened its doors next to the SAC campus in 2008, they have enrolled 427 students in the Passport Program. Of these, 261 (63 percent) have completed all the program requirements—earning a high school credential, passing the ACCUPLACER, and successfully completing a college course—with another 32 still enrolled and on track to complete. Fifty students have already earned a certificate or Associate's degree and 228 are continuing in college for either their Associate's or Bachelor's.

¹ Restore Education's agreement with San Antonio College allows students to take six college credit hours before earning their GED or high school diploma.



Restore Education's dual strategy represents a key design choice for programs that are unable to offer a full teacher-led curriculum and need to combine GED preparation with college preparation. Restore Education serves up to 15 students in each eight-week cohort, as well as students preparing to enter the next cohort who also attend regularly. Students work independently and with teachers on a flexible timetable. Teachers supplement face-to-face tutoring with online curriculum resources and a bank of instructional videos. Restore Education staff support students in the college sociology course with sessions in which they review, preview, and scaffold the material. This enables the sociology course to serve a dual purpose: It exposes students to their first college course, familiarizing them with college culture and expectations within a sheltered environment, and it gives students a high dose of the rich instruction they need to prepare themselves for subsequent college coursework. Restore Education's individualized approach has enabled them to offer a customized menu of GED or ACCUPLACER preparation, college readiness skills training, and a college course to over 1,200 students since 2008 with only four full-time teachers and three part-time tutors on staff.²

As described below, Restore Education couples enriched academic preparation through a first college course with a pragmatic and efficient approach to helping students get their GED and qualify for additional college classes.

ENRICHED PREPARATION THROUGH A FIRST COLLEGE COURSE

Through their first college course *Introduction to Sociology*, Restore Education students develop the key cognitive strategies and content knowledge required for continued college success. All students enroll in a course section taught by Tina Yarbrough, a supportive instructor whom program staff identified as committed to helping former dropouts and other nontraditional students succeed. Yarbrough uses highly engaging instructional strategies and relates the material to students' personal experiences and prior knowledge. From the first day of class, Yarbrough makes an effort to get to know each student and encourages the class to form a learning community. She facilitates robust discussion and questioning, using instructional strategies that make college-level sociology concepts accessible to students of all skill levels. Through the course and the related study sessions held at Restore Education, students strengthen their core reading, writing, and communication skills.

The course helps students gain college navigation skills by learning about college culture, campus resources, and relations with professors. Students attend class on the San Antonio College campus, which helps them begin to develop an identity as a college student. They use the library and other campus resources, and they gain practice going to office hours and communicating with their instructor. Restore Education students take the *Introduction to Sociology* course alongside students who are not part of the program, and begin to build bridges with these other college students.

Finally, the course is accompanied by formal, concentrated academic support and scaffolding to ensure early college success. Restore Education provides this support to ensure that students can be successful in the course and that their first college experience is a positive one. A staff member attends each session of the *Introduction to Sociology* course, videotaping it for students who were absent or for those who want to watch it again to reinforce their learning. Teachers collaborate with the instructor so they can appropriately scaffold, review, and preview the course material in regular study sessions outside of class. For instance, when the course assignment was to develop an annotated bibliography, Restore Education teachers held a follow-up session to deconstruct the assignment, support students through the process, and answer questions. These sessions also focus on helping students develop college-ready academic behaviors, including study skills, time management, persistence, and awareness of their performance. Students who are unable to attend the group study sessions can always get one-on-one help from Restore Education at another time.

² Of the approximately 1,200 students participating in any aspect of their programming, 427 students have been enrolled in the more intensive and comprehensive Passport Program.



EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT GED AND ACCUPLACER PREPARATION

Part of helping students cross the bridge to college is helping them get their secondary credential. The Restore Education staff have developed a pragmatic, cost-effective preparation model that's based on tutoring, flexible timetables, and supplementary materials including a large bank of instructional videos.

As part of the intake process, all students take an ACCUPLACER diagnostic exam developed by Restore Education to determine a baseline score and help program staff identify skill gaps. The tutoring curriculum, materials, and videos have been finely tuned to the ACCUPLACER, and students have multiple structured opportunities while in the program to take the exam.

Maximum flexibility is a core value of the program. Aside from the sociology course, there are no set hours for attendance, although Restore Education strongly recommends that students attend at least 20 hours per week. Because instruction takes place one on one or in small groups, the program is structured so that students can get tutoring and other academic supports at a wide range of times. The center is open every Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., when students can seek help from four full-time teachers and three part-time tutors. Most students complete the core of the program in four to six months, although Restore Education provides tutoring and other support to graduates as they continue with college.

Restore Education uses a range of technological tools to supplement on-site instruction and make learning opportunities flexible. The program supplements its written curriculum and assignments with online curriculum and software activities and drills. Staff have recorded more than 50 instructional videos detailing strategies for tackling portions of the ACCUPLACER exam and posted these videos to the [Restore Education YouTube channel](#). Students are referred to these videos and watch them both when on-site at Restore Education and in their own time as they complete coursework for the program. As mentioned above, a teacher from Restore Education records each session of the sociology course and makes the videos available to students who either missed the class or want to watch it again to reinforce their learning. When Restore Education teachers lead a review session at the program site to scaffold what was taught in sociology class, they often tape the session and post it online as well.

NOTE TAKING TOOL: A DUAL STRATEGY

1. How does your program balance a focus on GED preparation with a focus on college readiness? What challenges do you face in accomplishing both goals?

2. While in your program, how do students get the opportunity to develop the key cognitive strategies and content knowledge required for college success?

3. To what extent do students get exposure to college culture, environment, and expectations while in your program?

4. What technological tools and solutions do you use in order to increase flexibility for students and save costs? What additional tools could you use?

5. What aspects of the Restore Education model could be adapted to your program? What aspects would not be easily transferrable?



FIRST YEAR SUPPORT: GUIDING STUDENTS TOWARD COLLEGE COURSES THAT AID THEIR MOMENTUM

During their time in the program, all students take an eight-week college course in introductory sociology at San Antonio College, while simultaneously working toward their GED or high school diploma and raising their college placement test scores so they can qualify to take subsequent college coursework. After students have earned their high school credential and passed *Introduction to Sociology* (3 credits), they are considered program completers, but Restore Education continues to support their college momentum. Restore Education helps program graduates enroll at SAC or one of the other nearby colleges to take two 3-credit college courses in the next eight-week session, and then two more courses in the following session, all with Restore Education's support.

While taking these college courses, students come to Restore Education for individual help from teachers as well as participate in study sessions with their peers. Restore Education teachers coach students by helping them to interpret and tackle their assignments, critiquing drafts of their work, and encouraging them to develop strong study and time management skills. At the same time, they foster students' independence by gradually encouraging students to handle their course load with increasing autonomy.

Since 2008, 47 percent of program graduates have finished 15 college credit hours in six months with the program's support, or are on track to do so. This completion rate reflects significant momentum towards graduation.³ At that point, staff will tell a student: "You're a quarter of the way to your degree and you didn't even realize it. Now just keep going!" And Restore Education welcomes graduates who continue to seek help beyond that milestone.

A key ingredient in Restore Education's success is picking the right courses and instructors for their students. How does Restore Education steer its students toward college courses and instructors—those that increase the likelihood of success while filling critical knowledge gaps for formerly off-track students and put them on the path to college completion? Restore Education uses the following list of criteria and guiding questions to counsel students.

IS THE COURSE PART OF THE STUDENT'S DEGREE PLAN?

Back on Track students, many of whom are balancing school with other life responsibilities and financial considerations, cannot afford to take a course that is not part of their degree plan. Restore Education encourages students to take general education requirements common to all Associate's degree plans when choosing their first college courses. That way if a student later changes their major or intended career path, their credits will be fully transferable.

IS THE COURSE CONTENT HIGH QUALITY?

When considering a college course, it can be highly valuable to preview the content by looking at past syllabi or online assignments. When teacher Kerri Rhodes of Restore Education heard good reviews from her graduates of a freshman composition instructor, she reviewed that instructor's course material online and found that the readings were rigorous, with each assignment building on the skills developed from the previous one. Restore Education now recommends this instructor to all of its graduates enrolling in Freshman Composition.

² See, for example: Steinberg and Almeida 2012. Nationally, only 11.8 percent of students who enter postsecondary with a GED finish with a degree after six years (Patterson et. al, 2010).

IS THE COURSE MATERIAL AND THE INSTRUCTOR ENGAGING?

Restore Education emphasizes the importance of students having positive early experiences with college, increasing their likelihood of persistence. In the *Introduction to Sociology* course that all Restore Education students take, the instructor uses highly engaging instructional strategies and connects sociological themes to students' personal lives. Restore Education staff seek similarly engaging courses to recommend to students when choosing their next courses. In order to determine these course they often rely on alumni recommendations and online reviews.

IS THE COURSE FEASIBLE?

Likewise, students' first college courses should not be courses in which they are likely to flounder academically. Restore Education staff steer students toward first courses that are challenging, but not to those that are notoriously difficult or deal with highly technical or obscure subject matter.

IS THE COURSE FLEXIBLE?

Students juggling multiple responsibilities may find it easier to succeed in a course with a flexible format. For that reason, Restore Education encourages students to take at least one course online. Staff also seek out courses with some built-in flexibility (e.g., students can attend a lecture at a different time if the need arises).

IS THE INSTRUCTOR RESPECTFUL OF ALL STUDENTS?

When possible, students should enroll in courses taught by an instructor who has a history of and an interest in working with students who are formerly off-track or who are part of traditionally underserved populations. Restore Education has found that its students have the most positive experiences with instructors who hold students to high standards, who respect and get to know their students, and who are willing to help formerly off-track students acclimate to the rigors and requirements of college.

ARE PEERS IN THE STUDENT'S SUPPORT NETWORK ENROLLED IN THE COURSE?

While it is not always possible, students should aim to enroll in courses along with supportive peers. At Restore Education, staff encourage their students to enroll in the same section of courses so they can form study groups and remind one another of assignments and due dates. For example, in fall 2011, nine Restore Education graduates taking the same section of Freshman Composition worked together in regularly scheduled sessions at Restore Education to brainstorm, construct, and critique writing assignments.

REFERENCES

Patterson, Margaret Becker, Zhang, Jizhi, Song, Wei, and Guison-Dowdy, Anne. 2010. *Crossing the Bridge: GED Credentials and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education

Steinberg, Adria and Almeida, Cheryl. 2012. *Pathway to Recovery: Implementing a Back on Track Through College Model*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

NOTE TAKING TOOL: GUIDING STUDENTS TO COURSES THAT AID MOMENTUM

Criteria	Yes or No
Is the course part of the student's degree plan?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Is the course content high quality?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Is the course material and instructor engaging?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Is the course feasible?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Is the course flexible?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Is the instructor respectful of all students?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	
Are peers in the student's support network enrolled in the course?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:	

