

# ABE-to-College Transitions and the ELA Framework: Extending the Continuum

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The Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Frameworks are comprehensive and well-conceived road maps. They serve as guides to instruction in ABE classrooms and help teachers identify what their students need to know and be able to do within a specific content area.

The Curriculum Framework for the English Language Arts (hereafter called the ELA Framework) was designed to address the needs of learners acquiring basic literacy and writing skills—Level 1: Initial (Grade Level Equivalency [GLE] 0–1.9) through Level 5: Adept (GLE 9–12). Level 5: Adept includes the skills students need to earn an adult secondary education (ASE) credential.

Increasingly, however, ABE students are continuing their education at the post-secondary education (PSE) level, often at one of the 15 Massachusetts community colleges. Since the ABE educational continuum now extends to preparation for PSE, the ASE credential is no longer the terminal benchmark for the ABE classroom. ABE instructors need to know and be able to teach the skills and content necessary to prepare their students for a successful transition to college.

## The ELA Framework and Transitions to College

While the ELA Framework

stops at the ASE level, it can still be useful in addressing many of the skills students need to successfully transition to college. However, these skills are embedded in the framework in Level 5: Adept and are not explicitly connected to college-level work.

Unlike the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Framework for Mathematics and Numeracy, where skills to college level standards



are explicitly identified in Level 6, practitioners using the ELA Framework to help students prepare for college need to do a little hunting to identify the skills relevant to their teaching.

For example, in Level 5, reading standard 3 states: "Learners will use a variety of strategies to comprehend written English," and one of the benchmarks in Level 5 states: "Take notes of key ideas while reading (e.g. para-

phrase in the margins, outline)." These are essential skills for reading longer college texts, and teachers can apply them to appropriate selections to help get students ready for content-specific assignments.

Another example in Level 5: Writing standard 1, states: "Learners will express themselves through writing for a variety of purposes." Since students will need to write essay exams, narratives, and other kinds of expository writing in college, this standard is useful for transition students. Another benchmark in Level 5 states, "With assistance, complete a research paper of 8–10 pages that draws from varied, cited reference materials and includes evidence of comprehensive understanding of the subject through ample facts, details, and examples. As we know from undergraduate work, this skill is absolutely critical to a student's success in college.

## The Need to Go Beyond the Frameworks for Successful Transitions

Although there are many other benchmarks that identify the skills students need to be successful in college, there remain several important skills that are not addressed in the Frameworks. ABE programs and instructors can create a kind of Level 6: ASE Bridge to College

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## ABE to College...

component of the ELA Framework to address the gaps in the current Framework. Like their students, instructors will need to do some homework, researching what students need to know and be able to do to be successful in college. This investigation involves learning more about the type of skills needed to be successful in college and an understanding of the placement tests required by most colleges, including the Massachusetts community colleges.

### The Narrow Door of Placement Testing

Massachusetts community colleges use the ACCUPLACER to determine the level at which a student will begin coursework. The ACCUPLACER is a set of computer-based placement tests (e.g., reading comprehension, sentence skills, math) used extensively by colleges throughout the country as part of their placement process. ABE instructors, especially those at the ASE level, must understand the design and delivery of the ACCUPLACER, as a placement test and not an assessment tool, in order to help their students prepare for the test. Two very different areas of concern come up frequently in discussions with college personnel: the need to prepare students for the mechanics of test-taking by computer and helping students build the critical thinking skills needed to successfully answer

the reading comprehension questions. In addition, some Massachusetts community colleges request that the student produce a writing sample as part of the placement process.

### The Importance of College Placement Test Results

ACCUPLACER scores place the student into college-level courses, like English Composition I or College Algebra, or into below college-level courses, typically referred to as developmental education. The placement decision is based on "cut scores" for each test, those scores identified with student success at a particular level of coursework. Students with low placement scores will need to take and pass one or more semesters of reading, writing, and/or math before they can proceed to courses that count toward their major and college graduation. This can add months (or years!) of classes to their trail through college, particularly if students are not prepared for college-level reading.

### Your Homework Assignment

Entering and succeeding in college is more than just taking placement tests and producing a writing sample. If we return to the ELA Framework Reading standard mentioned earlier, choosing reading materials that reflect those used in college and helping students develop reading strategies can help ASE students prepare for the broader goal of success in postsecondary education. To accomplish this, ABE teachers need to investigate the kinds of

texts used in college developmental reading and writing courses and the kinds of assignments and reading students are expected to do in English Composition I. Though the texts do not have to be exactly the same, they should be similar in level of reading complexity. Becoming familiar with what students will face once they leave your classroom involves developing a relationship with college faculty and staff. These relationships can yield authentic and useful information for you to conceive of a Level 6: ASE Bridge to College component to the resources already available in the existing ESL Framework.

### Resources

#### **<[www.collegetransition.org](http://www.collegetransition.org)>**

The National College Transition Network Web site contains a wide variety of resources, including a section on placement testing under Counseling and several Promising Practices. (See especially, Preparing for College-level Math and Strategies to Facilitate Reading Comprehension in College Transition Students.)

#### **<[www.collegeforadults.org](http://www.collegeforadults.org)>**

College for Adults is a new website designed specifically for adult students. It contains information on all aspects of the admission and placement process.

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