



# Curriculum Implementation



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For the most part, there are four different spaces into which we've seen schools fit College Access Curriculum. They look somewhat different and can have a variety of names in different school sites, but they share underlying similarities across contexts. Each of these spaces has both pros and cons and there is no perfect choice for this work in already full school schedules anywhere. We saw the advantages and disadvantages play out in our seven case study schools, particularly in their first year of implementation.

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Since CARA began building our college access curriculum, we have worked in more than sixty New York City public schools. While we report here on the seven schools that we studied much more closely, the themes that rose to the top echo issues we have seen in our coaching work across the city over the past ten plus years.

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The first questions that schools face, once they decide to commit to implementing college access curriculum, are: when and where? Given the many demands on instructional time, how to fit this curriculum into the school’s already full schedule? And what is the right space, in terms of frequency, amount of time allotted in a period, groupings of students, and teacher suitability? There are rarely obvious or easy answers to these questions, and much of our work with schools

## Figure 4.1 Creating Instructional Space for College Access Curriculum

**ADVISORY** (or family group, or crew, or another similar designation): A space, often with a somewhat smaller size than regular classes, meant to address other-than-academic issues, i.e., social-emotional concerns, health, community service, etc.

**SEPARATE CLASS/SEMINAR**: A specific class meant to address college/career access activities, including exposure and preparedness lessons and actual filling out of college and financial aid applications.

**INSIDE SUBJECT CLASSES**: Schools might choose to give a particular department responsibility for including lessons in their content classes over the course of the year for all four years, or share this responsibility across departments, e.g., within math in 9th grade, science in 10th, etc.

**SPECIAL EVENT DAYS**: A set of chosen days throughout the year when regular schedules are put on hold, and an entire school or grade focuses on college access lessons and/or tasks.

**Figure 4.2** Pros and Cons of Instructional Spaces

Model	Pros	Cons
<b>Advisory:</b> CARA lessons are part of the curriculum in regular 9–12 advisory program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Builds on schools’ existing structures</li> <li>&gt; Schools with strong advisory programs often have teams in place for developing and sharing advisory curriculum</li> <li>&gt; Easy to develop vertically aligned curriculum</li> <li>&gt; Often smaller class sizes with individual attention</li> <li>&gt; If advisors follow students over four years, they may get to know students very well and be familiar with their post-secondary goals</li> <li>&gt; Advisors often have access to a students’ family</li> <li>&gt; Builds capacity and knowledge of all staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Advisory periods may be short</li> <li>&gt; Advisory is often lowest priority for teachers</li> <li>&gt; Lack of teacher consistency in implementation</li> <li>&gt; Involves training every single staff member</li> <li>&gt; Many other things may get tossed into advisory which can displace college and career lessons</li> <li>&gt; Advisory culture (do staff and students expect it to be a study hall or relaxation time?)</li> <li>&gt; Administrative oversight and teacher accountability can be limited</li> <li>&gt; If advisory is not credit-bearing, students may not always take it seriously</li> </ul>
<b>College/Career Seminar:</b> A specific class, often in multiple grades, designed to prepare students for post-secondary application and transition process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Affects program of fewer staff members</li> <li>&gt; Only need to worry about PD and support for a few key staff members</li> <li>&gt; Creates a special space where students can focus solely on their goals</li> <li>&gt; Is especially powerful in 11th and 12th grades</li> <li>&gt; Can be used in spring of 12th grade to support student transition</li> <li>&gt; Makes it logistically easier for counselor to accomplish specific application and financial aid tasks</li> <li>&gt; A dedicated class signals priority to students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Hard in early grades—students may not be developmentally ready for a lengthy course on college</li> <li>&gt; If taught by college counselor or guidance counselor, continues to position that person as “The Expert”</li> <li>&gt; Hard to program it into students’ schedules if it does not meet daily</li> <li>&gt; If taught by college counselor or guidance counselor, does not build staff capacity</li> <li>&gt; If taught by college counselor or guidance counselor, it may actually detract from that person’s available time for one-to-one support</li> <li>&gt; May have larger than average class sizes because of scheduling demands and teacher availability OR does not fit into some students’ schedules so they miss out</li> </ul>
<b>Special Event Days:</b> Students forgo their classes to attend a rotation of workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Flexibility in terms of staff (can involve as few or as many as desired and in many different ways)</li> <li>&gt; Great for schools that cannot find other space due to programming issues, staffing concerns, or credit accumulation concerns</li> <li>&gt; Potential to involve youth leaders or peer-to-peer work</li> <li>&gt; Can be a fun, welcome break from regular school routine</li> <li>&gt; Can pack many lessons and experiences in at once</li> <li>&gt; Can signal importance and build energy/momentum in school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Very burdensome at the start to plan and create the structure; becomes easier in subsequent years</li> <li>&gt; A different routine than a regular school day may lead to weak attendance or students not taking the content seriously</li> <li>&gt; Staff may have concerns that students are missing “academic content” on these days</li> <li>&gt; May involve teacher/student pairings that do not happen at other points in the year, which may lead to challenging staff/student dynamics</li> <li>&gt; Space can be a concern—some schools solve this by going off-site</li> </ul>
<b>Academic Classes:</b> Curriculum is embedded in core or elective classes in each grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Builds on schools’ existing structures</li> <li>&gt; Positions college access as valuable because it is part of students’ regular learning and impacts their grades</li> <li>&gt; Can be aligned with curricular standards that already feel important/worthy to teachers</li> <li>&gt; Builds capacity and knowledge of many staff members, including entire grade levels or departments</li> <li>&gt; Flexible—can be done once a month in early grades; once a week in upper grades</li> <li>&gt; Administration can easily plan to monitor teacher implementation through observation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Lack of teacher consistency in implementation</li> <li>&gt; Involves training many staff members, often through multiple, differentiated trainings</li> <li>&gt; Involves a lot of initial planning to get vertical and grade-wide alignment</li> <li>&gt; Needs administration’s oversight to ensure lessons are actually happening</li> <li>&gt; Less time in the class for other course objectives (can be a problem if it is in a high stakes class like math that concludes with a state exam)</li> <li>&gt; Can be challenging to find a class every student takes, especially in 12th grade</li> </ul>

## Advisory

While we—and many schools—initially saw this as a natural fit for post-secondary curriculum because it did not already have set content, there were significant drawbacks to this instructional space. At Centro High School, for example, the length of their advisory period (30 minutes) proved to be a challenging fit with inquiry-based lessons designed to encourage extended conversations or with engagement with complex activities. Most lessons needed to be done over a two-day period, losing student interest and focus in the intervening days or sometimes weeks.

A second major challenge was precisely the fact that advisory did not have set content. At the High School for Leadership, CARA lessons were initially welcomed by advisors. They had often struggled with the loose structure of the advisory space, which did not have a clear scope and sequence or curriculum. However, regularly implementing actual lessons when students had become accustomed to study halls, culture and community-building activities, announcements, and fun activities, proved to be a challenge for many advisors.

The catch-all nature of advisory at the High School for Leadership also meant that any *other* new initiatives were also placed into the space: in the same year that they began their work with CARA, the school began doing restorative justice circles weekly in advisory, and the two initiatives ended up competing for time in the limited real estate of advisory minutes. In the first semester of doing the lessons, the college counselor talked about what she was hearing from advisors:

*“We don’t have time to do everything the administration is asking. It feels like too much. We just don’t know when these lessons are going to happen, with so much else going on.”*

One of the teachers who had taken leadership around college access with her grade commented at the end of the second year:

*“I think the biggest challenge to using the CARA material, just in terms of the lesson plans and the curriculum ... in terms of getting it to be the most effective, the issue has been just competing pressures in terms of delivering that content.”*

On the other hand, at Career High School, one Assistant Principal who also served as an advisor of 12th graders and had been with the same group of students since 9th grade noted that the advisory structure allowed staff members to work with families on the important, fine-grained details of decision making:

*“What’s happening in advisory, particularly because the advisory teachers know the families so well at this point and know the students so well is, really trying to help them create some pros and cons or sort of project into the future a little bit. Like, what does it mean to stay home for an additional year or two? What does it mean to leave a school in four years with \$60,000 in debt, what will it look like to pay that off, how much money do you have to make?”*

The value of these long-term advisory relationships was clear when it came to working with families and really being on the ground helping students make difficult decisions.

## College/Career Seminar

Dedicated seminar spaces solve the problem of competing pressures, but raise different issues. For example, at Arts High School, a full-year class twice a week was created for both 11th and 12th graders. The extensive time commitment to this work by the school was a big step forward; however, the teacher assigned was a dance teacher who had space in her program (i.e., needed another class to be teaching her full contractual load). The CARA coach helped her to create a syllabus using CARA lessons, but as she reflected after a visit:

*“Maria struggled with classroom management in 11th grade; and while the 12th grade class was engaged in the work, [her] lack of background knowledge on the intricacies of college counseling meant she couldn’t help students with many necessary tasks.”*

At Centro High School, a related issue emerged with the lessons that were supposed to be included in 10th grade. The plan had been to add them to a research class taught by the librarian, but she felt overwhelmed and in the first semester, simply neglected to teach them at all. At World High School, where lessons were put into an 11th grade internship seminar, it emerged halfway through the year that the teacher had been educated under the British system and was ill-equipped to teach a subject with which she was so unfamiliar; once again, she simply did not teach the lessons.

On other hand, the strengths of having a single person work deeply with the curriculum became evident at Arts High School in year three, when the 11th and 12th grade seminars were taken over by an Assistant Principal who was herself a first-generation person of color, and who transformed the course by infusing it with her own experiences:

*“I introduce a boxing glove, I talk about me fighting every single day for my education in college—which was me humbling myself and being knocked down and getting back up ... I opened myself up to them, so they can understand it’s possible to fail and still succeed at the same time. And if I didn’t take this approach, if I just taught the class with the CARA curriculum as it’s written in the binder, I don’t think that they would have the resilience they need.”*

The 9th grade seminar teacher at Centro High School—who was also an Assistant Principal and former college counselor and first-generation college graduate of color—had a similar strong presence and successful outcomes in the college access seminar she taught.

At Neighborhood High School, a core group of teachers took on college seminars for 11th and 12th graders as a large part of their program, and this allowed for targeted professional development for them, a close-knit teacher team that could plan together, and intensive collaboration with the college office. An Assistant Principal there who worked extensively with this group remarked:

*“The teachers understand that we’re not working in a silo, we’re working to support the college office and the college counselors—this class needs to serve as supporting the work that needs to get done with the students.”*

And at Career High School, the 12th grade seminar classes were a logical and coherent space to bring in Bridge Coaches to teach lessons and support seniors, something that would have been significantly more difficult if lessons were scattered across multiple advisories or different content area classes.

**Figure 4.3** Seven Schools’ Approaches to Curriculum Implementation

Name of School	9th/10th grade approach	11th/12th grade approach
<b>Career HS</b>	> Advisory	> 11th advisory > 12th advisory and full-year seminar
<b>Technology HS</b>	> Academic classes	> Counselor push-in to CTE classes
<b>World HS</b>	> Advisory	> 11th in internship seminar > 12th advisory
<b>HS for Leadership</b>	> Advisory	> Advisory
<b>Centro HS</b>	> Advisory > 9th seminar > Academic class in 10th	> Advisory > 11th grade seminar spring semester > Varied academic classes in 11th grade
<b>Arts HS</b>	> English classes	> 11th grade seminar full-year
<b>Neighborhood HS</b>	> English classes	> 11th grade spring seminar > 12th grade fall seminar

### Other Approaches

Technology High School is the only one of our seven schools that decided to use academic classes as the main vehicle for college access lessons across grades, and this was only after exploring several other unsuccessful avenues. Toward the end of their second year, a guidance counselor took charge of distributing one lesson per grade per month to all of the teachers; the entire school would then do the assigned lesson at the same time. In the next year, however, only two of these lessons were done by teachers across grades.

At Neighborhood High School, this was also a last resort, after trying for two and a half years to find other routes in the 9th and 10th grade that ultimately proved unsuccessful. At the end of their third year, they began doing one lesson per month for 9th and

10th graders in English classes, with English teachers meeting occasionally to discuss lesson implementation and share strategies.

And one school not included in the study has entirely used content classes for access lessons, situating them in math classes in grades 9–11 and discussing implementation at weekly math team meetings. They have found that fitting them in on what they call “strategic days”—i.e., leading up to a vacation or in between units of study—made it possible to adopt this approach without disrupting their content teaching.

None of our seven schools exclusively used special event days to address college access curriculum, and on the whole we do not think it is a reliable enough structure to support the time required to implement a

comprehensive 9–12 curriculum. We do know of one small school that has had success with this for 9th and 10th graders (while holding seminars for 11th and 12th graders), and are currently working with another school that is planning to use special event days as one major space to do college access curriculum.

As noted in Figure 4.3, Centro High School, World High School and Career High School opted to spread curriculum work across multiple areas in particular grades; in all cases, a seminar class and advisory in particular grades and also 9th/10th/11th grade academic classes at Centro (see Figure 4.4 for Centro’s curriculum map). While this provided additional time to engage in college access work—and allowed a variety of kinds of staff to take part—in both schools it got off to a bumpy start, given the amount of coordination required to make the experience coherent for students. Strong intervention by school leadership—and clear identification of who is the “lead” for the work—were important in smoothing the way for this to happen successfully

### Other Key Takeaways

Looking across the seven schools (while also keeping in mind our experiences with our other partner schools not in the study), a number of other key takeaways about the conditions required for the successful implementation of college access curriculum across grades 9–12 jumped out at us. In particular, we were struck by similarities that seemed to hold across school types, as those seemed perhaps the most telling about both the challenges schools face and the routes to success. No matter which model a school chose at the outset, they tended to stick with their approach even in the face of evidence of major flaws, so it is important to choose wisely when beginning this work.

What, then, is important to think about when choosing instructional spaces to teach college access curriculum?

- > **There are many possible options for early awareness work in 9th/10th grade:** Centro High School does lessons in a 9th grade seminar; it is done entirely in advisory at Career High School; Neighborhood High School is using subject classes in 9th and 10th grade as a space for early awareness work. Because the content is more general, and the number of lessons is fewer, the work can be approached much more flexibly at this point in students’ high school careers. One caveat to this is for schools like World High School that serve a large percentage of students with English as a new language (ENL). Since most World High School students were ENLs and recently arrived immigrants to the United States, adapting lessons to their needs was more challenging. However, CARA is working with a group of these schools around New York City and they are tackling this work in 9/10th grade, just more slowly and in smaller increments.



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**Figure 4.4** Sample Curriculum Map, Centro High School


## Sample Curriculum Map

	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
Mapping the Landscape of College	<b>SEMINAR</b> Surveying Student Knowledge About College College Visits Pre/During/Post for Fall Trip  <b>ADVISORY</b> College Sort College in America: Myths and Realities First in the Family College Match College Interviews College Visits Pre/During/Post for Spring Trip	<b>SEMINAR</b> Surveying Student Knowledge About College SUNY Scavenger Hunt College Match (modified to be all about CUNY) Researching Colleges Online  <b>ADVISORY</b> Exploring College Majors College Visits Pre/During/Post	<b>ADVISORY</b> Surveying Student Knowledge About College College Matching College Interviews College Visits Pre/During/Post  <b>SEMINAR</b> Exploring College Majors Researching Colleges Online The College Search: What's Important to Me	<b>ADVISORY</b> Surveying Student Knowledge About College College Visits Pre/During/Post College Fair Visit Pre/Post Exploring College Majors  <b>Spring Advisory or Transition Workshops:</b> Looking at College Schedules Exploring Course Catalogs What Types of Classes Do College Students Take? Using College Resources
College Application Process	<b>ADVISORY</b> Activity Log Year Ahead Plan Transcript Review Summer Plan	<b>ADVISORY</b> Activity Log Transcript Review Mock Admissions Committee Making A CUNY List 1 (an introduction to CUNY system)	<b>ADVISORY</b> Activity Log Mock Admissions Committee (spring) <b>SEMINAR</b> Reach/Match/Safety Making A CUNY List 2 Making A CUNY List 3 Making a SUNY List	<b>ADVISORY</b> Brag Sheet Future Plan <b>ELA</b> Essays <b>PUSH IN</b> College Application Steps Completing CUNY App Completing SUNY App After You Hit Submit
Paying for College	<b>ADVISORY</b> What is Financial Aid Part 1	<b>ADVISORY</b> What is Financial Aid Parts 2 and 3	<b>ADVISORY</b> What is Financial Aid Part 3 Comparing the Costs of Public and Private Colleges What Are Opportunity Programs	<b>ADVISORY</b> Comparing Financial Aid Packages  <b>PUSH IN</b> Looking at FAFSA Steps to Financial Aid Making Sense of Financial Aid Letters
Exploring Careers	<b>SEMINAR</b> Investigating Career Interests	<b>SEMINAR</b> Investigating Career Interests* Résumé Development  <b>ADVISORY</b> Career Sort Career Jeopardy	<b>ADVISORY</b> Career Interview Looking at Career Clusters* Career Jeopardy	<b>ADVISORY</b> Develop materials on professionalism
Milestones:	College Trip to Manhattan College Spring CUNY trip	Fall CUNY trip	College Trips: Manhattan and AP for All SUNY	College Trip to SUNY
Assessments	Write Up of Interview College Obs/ Guide Activity Log Year Ahead Plan Career Interest Survey Summer Plan	College Research Project Activity Log College Obs/ Guide Career Interest Survey	Write Up of Interviews College Obs/ Guide Career Clusters Survey CUNY/ SUNY Lists	Personal Statement/Essay

\*Can substitute Naviance's career survey for either of these



- > The amount and complexity of college access material and tasks in 11th grade means that this area is much less flexible. Instead, **a dedicated class second semester junior year and first semester senior year** are best suited to accomplishing post-secondary application tasks at this level. At schools that opted for this structure, conversations among staff were about how to improve the structure and content of these classes, while at schools where college access continued to be done exclusively or mostly in advisory, staff voiced facing the same frustrations year after year without seeing progress.
- > **12th graders need so much individual support for much of the year that a classroom space with a single adult is insufficient and multiple adults are needed to address individual needs.** No matter how expert a teacher is—or if a college counselor themselves is teaching a senior seminar—the individualized nature of college application tasks from October of senior year on make it impossible for most of the work to be done in a “lesson” format. At schools with seminar classes, it was possible to bring in peer leaders to help in these spaces, and they acted as critical additional staff that made it possible to provide enough individualized help to keep most students in a class moving forward with the necessary tasks. Schools that recognized the different needs of senior year by, for example, shifting the dates and purposes of family conferences, were better able to meet these individual needs as they arose.
- > As our economy shifts, **it is increasingly important to address the point of post-secondary education and how it links to careers early on and throughout the curriculum**—by exploring interests and talents and understanding how they link to college study and to careers. Many 9th and 10th grade teachers struggle to engage students in thinking about college because it feels so distant to their students, but fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds are at the perfect developmental stage to think about who they are and who they want to be. For older students, a grounded sense of what they want to study in college and beyond will help them hold on to plans in the face of obstacles, and to make wiser choices about schools that make sense for them both educationally and financially.
- > As is true with undertaking any new initiative, **starting small and sustainably growing the work in phases is likely to lead to greater success.** Both Career High School and Neighborhood High School purposefully started with a smaller group of students (Career started with 11/12 and then a later rollout to 9/10; Neighborhood started with a few sections of 11th graders) and have ended up with more solid structures than Centro, the High School for Leadership, Technology High School, and World High School, all of whom tackled everything at once in the first year. This graduated piloting approach allows more room to assess what works and what does not and fix any mistakes before scaling up. This approach also makes it easier to provide the necessary professional development to staff and to build buy-in from both faculty and students.

- > **The value of a piloting approach holds for the number of lessons as well.** At Career High School, 11th grade teachers were overwhelmed by the number of lessons they were supposed to get through in the first year, and failed to teach many of them in the spring. This led to discouragement and a sense of failure, despite how many new things they *had* done. A sense of early success and momentum are crucial for new initiatives, and so, at the beginning, less is more.
- > As with any other school curriculum, **there is a need for accountability for both teachers and students.** While perhaps we wish it were otherwise—that both teachers and students would stick to and take seriously the planned college access scope and sequence because they see it as valuable—this is not the model on which high schools are designed. Attention is paid to things that count toward grades—the currency of schools—and so college access curriculum needs to be woven into this accountability system. Schools approached this in different ways: while

Career and Neighborhood High Schools gave grades for completing tasks in both 11th and 12th grade seminars, Centro made turning in financial documents part of the grade in the 12th grade fall government class. At schools where there was no accountability system for this work, teachers said that their colleagues—and admitted that they themselves—often did not do planned lessons. At the same time, the most successful accountability systems were built not on top-down structures, but teachers’ accountability to their peers, accomplished through shared planning time and shared ownership over the curriculum. In the face of inevitable teacher turnover, durable systems were important to maintaining accountability over time.

- > And finally, no matter which route a school takes to implement a college access curriculum, **leadership plays a critical role in making this new strand of work successful.** This means attending closely to the problems that arise early on, and problem-solving to ensure teachers get the support they need to undertake this new work (for an example of this see Case Study: Career High School.) It means empowering teachers to take on leadership in their work with their peers. It means putting the kinds of accountability systems mentioned above in place and ensuring that they are maintained. It means consistent messaging both directly through words and through actions (the dedication of resources like time and money) that college access work is a priority amidst the many competing priorities of a school.



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