

Stated Briefly

# Ramping up to college readiness in Minnesota high schools: Implementation of a schoolwide program



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In collaboration with the Midwest College and Career Success Alliance

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Ramp-Up to Readiness™ (Ramp-Up) is a college readiness program that aims to enhance five dimensions of readiness in high school students: academic, admissions, career, financial, and personal–social. Ramp-Up’s developer theorizes that increasing these dimensions of readiness in high school students will improve college enrollment and success rates. Implementation of Ramp-Up involves distribution of program leadership responsibilities across multiple staff, off-site and on-site professional development for key staff, advisories, and guidance in postsecondary planning for all students. Because elements of implementation require changes in staff roles and attitudes within high schools, school and district administrators seek evidence that schools are able to adequately implement Ramp-Up. This study addressed the implementation question by collecting data from 10 high schools that implemented Ramp-Up in 2013/14 and 10 similar high schools that did not implement the program that year.

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This brief summarizes the findings of Lindsay, J., Davis, E., Stephan, J., Bonsu, P., and Narlock, J. (2016). *Ramping up for college readiness in Minnesota high schools: Implementation of a schoolwide program* (REL 2016–146). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=381>.

## **Why this study?**

College education is fundamental to students' upward mobility, states' economic growth, and the country's economic competitiveness (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Hanushek & Kimko, 2000; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). Most high school graduates (93 percent) plan to enroll in college (Ross et al., 2012), but just 79 percent do so by age 20 (Center for Public Education, 2014). Even among students who enroll, less than 65 percent attain a postsecondary credential (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Faced with this gap between college plans and college completion, states and high schools are being pressured to better prepare students to enroll and succeed in college. Several strategies have been adopted to respond to the pressure, including requiring students to complete a postsecondary plan, adopting standards that are better aligned with college expectations, offering students more opportunities for dual enrollment, and improving the college advising process.

Another approach that aims to improve college enrollment and success rates focuses on student development. This approach involves introducing students to college and career planning at an earlier age—as early as middle school—through age-appropriate activities. These activities, as well as career planning and plan monitoring and refinement, can continue as students progress through high school (Bouffard & Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Researchers at the University of Minnesota's College Readiness Consortium created Ramp-Up to Readiness™ (Ramp-Up)—a program for middle schools and high schools that attempts to increase students' readiness for college by using this developmental approach. As of 2014, Ramp-Up had been implemented in 52 Minnesota middle schools and high schools, but no independent evidence is available on whether schools can implement the program or whether the program has an impact on students. This brief provides initial evidence on the first question: whether schools can implement the program at levels considered adequate by the consortium.

**Ramp-Up to Readiness aims to increase college enrollment and degree attainment by improving students' readiness along five dimensions: academic, admissions, career, financial, and personal-social**

The theory of action that underlies Ramp-Up posits that presenting the program's college readiness curriculum to students in middle school and high school will enhance five interrelated dimensions of readiness in students, which should then lead to immediate, intermediate, and long-term college-related outcomes (figure 1). However, implementing Ramp-Up in high schools requires establishing several processes. The processes can challenge staff members' attitudes about which students should go to college and may require staff to assume additional responsibilities.

***Ramp-Up's theory of action and the five dimensions of college readiness.*** In the traditional high school model, college readiness is assumed to organically emerge in students through participation in academic courses, extracurricular activities, and guidance counseling (Fazekas & Warren, 2010). Yet the implication of the aforementioned gap between postsecondary aspirations and college completion is that high schools may need to take a more explicit developmental approach to enhancing students' college readiness. According to the College Readiness Consortium (2012), the approach should focus on five interrelated dimensions of college readiness:

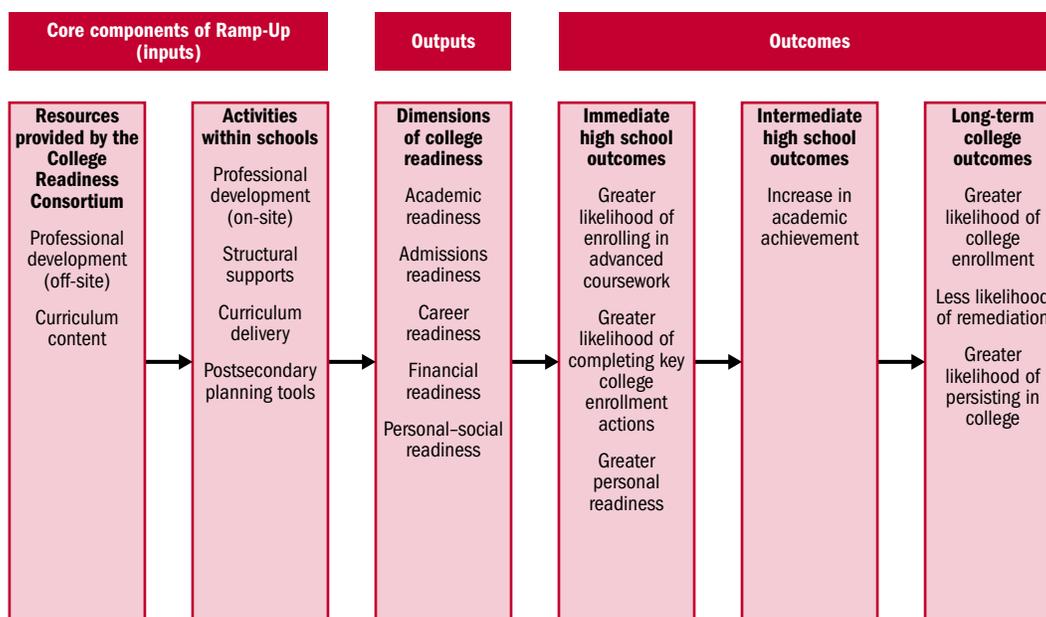
- ***Academic readiness.*** Providing students with the knowledge and skills to do first-year, credit-bearing, college-level work.
- ***Admissions readiness.*** Working with students to ensure they meet requirements for admission to the type of postsecondary education that matches their goals, interests, and abilities.

- **Career readiness.** Helping students understand how education increasingly determines income and opportunity in the global knowledge economy, how jobs in the future will need skilled workers, and which jobs will pay enough to support a family and match their interests and abilities.
- **Financial readiness.** Helping students find ways to cover the cost of one term of study (that is, a degree program) at a postsecondary institution through savings, loans, work–study, and financial aid.
- **Personal–social readiness.** Helping students set education goals, make progress toward those goals, and create relationships with peers and adults that support the achievement of those goals.

**Four processes for implementing Ramp-Up.** To enhance students’ readiness along the five dimensions of college readiness (referred to as outputs in the theory of action in figure 1), the consortium expects schools adopting Ramp-Up to enact the following processes:

- **Distributive leadership for Ramp-Up.** Schools assign staff to Ramp-Up roles, which include leadership team members (assigned to the school administrator, guidance counselor, and one or two lead teachers), coordinator (assigned to a lead teacher), and advisors (assigned to all teachers).
- **Off-site and on-site professional development.** The Ramp-Up leadership team and coordinator participate in off-site training sessions conducted by the consortium, where they learn about the curriculum and how to implement the program. During on-site professional development sessions, these staff share the curriculum and implementation strategy with the Ramp-Up advisors.
- **Advisories.** In their Ramp-Up advisor roles, all teachers—regardless of discipline—meet with a small number of students and lead them through 28 half-hour age-appropriate advisory sessions (about 1 session per week) and 5 one-hour workshops spaced throughout the year. During these sessions, advisors cover the content in the Ramp-Up curriculum. All students at the school are expected to participate in the advisory sessions and workshops.
- **Guidance.** Ramp-Up advisors help students write out their postsecondary goals and the steps that students can take at that point to progress toward their goals. Ramp-Up advisors and students also track students’ progress throughout the school year.

**Figure 1. Ramp-Up to Readiness theory of action**



Source: College Readiness Consortium, 2012.

High school administrators seeking to develop advisories in their high school face several challenges. Not only do they need to carve out the necessary time for advisory sessions and workshops within the school schedule, but they must also initiate a shift in staff responsibilities and attitudes about students' postsecondary options. Specifically, school administrators must:

- Initiate changes in teachers' responsibilities from that of content-area instructor only to content-area instructor and student advisor (Allen, Nichols, Tocci, Hochman, & Gross, 2006). With this shift, concern for students' postsecondary enrollment and success is no longer relegated to the school guidance counselors alone; it becomes a collective concern among the entire faculty.
- Initiate a change in attitude among staff from the traditional approach of distinguishing college-bound students from their peers to collectively encourage all students to strive for postsecondary success (Fazekas & Warren, 2010).

### **School administrators and other education stakeholders need information before deciding to adopt or endorse Ramp-Up to Readiness**

The Midwest College and Career Success Research Alliance, a group of education stakeholders from Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest Region states<sup>1</sup> who seek information on strategies and programs that can increase rates of participation in postsecondary education, partnered with REL Midwest to conduct studies on Ramp-Up that would address questions of primary concern to their agencies and to school administrators within the region. REL Midwest has carried out two studies that attempt to answer these questions. This report presents findings from the first study, which addressed the following questions<sup>2</sup>:

1. How does Ramp-Up differ from college-related supports in other schools?
2. To what extent did schools implement the core components of Ramp-Up as intended by the program developer?
3. What do school staff in Ramp-Up schools perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the program's curriculum, tools, and professional development, and which aspects of Ramp-Up did they consider more difficult to implement and why?

The research questions were addressed using data collected from students and staff in 20 Minnesota high schools, as well as program-planning documents provided by schools and the program developer (box 1).

### **What the study found**

Ramp-Up and comparison schools offered the same number and types of supplemental college-oriented supports (defined as programs, initiatives, or resources, such as dual enrollment programs, Upward Bound,<sup>3</sup> or presentations on financial aid). However, schools implementing Ramp-Up placed greater emphasis on four of five dimensions of college readiness than did comparison schools. On average, Ramp-Up schools implemented the program at levels that the College Readiness Consortium considers adequate. But most Ramp-Up schools failed to adequately implement the planning tools component.

### **Ramp-Up and comparison schools offer students similar types of supplemental college supports, but staff in Ramp-Up schools placed more schoolwide emphasis on college readiness**

The consortium expects that Ramp-Up schools and comparison schools will offer students who aspire to a postsecondary education the same number and types of supplemental college-oriented supports. However, schools implementing Ramp-Up were expected to show greater emphasis on college readiness in general

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## **Box 1. Data and methods**

To address the research questions, the study team collected data during focus groups and interviews, administered surveys to school staff and students in grades 10–12, and obtained schools' planning documents.

### **Study design**

The College Readiness Consortium recruited 20 Minnesota high schools to participate in the study. The schools were located mostly in rural areas (14 schools) and in towns (4 schools). One school was in an urban area, and one was in a suburban area. With technical assistance from REL Midwest, the consortium randomly assigned 10 schools to implement Ramp-Up to Readiness (Ramp-Up) during the 2013/14 school year and 10 schools to implement Ramp-Up the following school year (2014/15). The two groups of schools were equivalent on baseline academic achievement indicators (such as state assessments and graduation rates) and demographics (such as race/ethnicity of students and percentage of students eligible for the federal school lunch program). Dividing schools into these groups allowed college readiness activities to be compared between Ramp-Up and non-Ramp-Up schools.

### **Establishing expectations for Ramp-Up to Readiness schools**

The study team worked with the consortium to identify the main components and subcomponents of the program (see figure) and the types of evidence that would verify whether the subcomponents were fully implemented (coded 1) or partially implemented (coded between 0 and 1). The study team then calculated a fidelity index for each subcomponent by dividing the sum of the codes for subcomponents by the total number of indicators for the subcomponent and multiplying by 100. The consortium also established cutpoints for implementation fidelity among schools in their first year, with a fidelity index of 59 percent or less considered inadequate, an index of 60–89 percent considered adequate, and an index of 90 percent or greater considered excellent.

### **Data collection**

To address the research questions, the study team collected school-level data from the Minnesota Department of Education; extant student records from schools, districts, and the Minnesota Department of Education; students' responses to a survey; transcripts from one interview and one focus group with staff from Ramp-Up and comparison schools; extant documents from schools and the program developer (such as school implementation plans and master schedules and attendance logs from program training sessions); and teachers' responses to an online end-of-the-year survey. All data were from the 2013/14 school year and were collected between April and July 2014.

### **Data analysis**

To assess how Ramp-Up differs from the college readiness activities usually found in schools (research question 1), the study team analyzed several types of data. First, the study team listed all the supplemental college readiness supports (defined as programs, initiatives, or resources) mentioned by interviewees and focus group members in response to direct questions about those supports. The number and types of supports provided by Ramp-Up schools were compared with those offered by comparison schools. Second, the study team used data from staff and student surveys to examine the amount of staff engagement in four domains of college-oriented activity: curriculum and technology, staff professional development, staff–student interactions, and postsecondary planning. Third, the study team created school-specific aggregated scores based on student survey responses about the degree to which staff worked with students on each of the five dimensions of college readiness.<sup>1</sup> To compare Ramp-Up schools with non-Ramp-Up schools, the study team used accepted statistical approaches and established the 5 percent threshold for determining statistical significance (that is,  $p < .05$ ). To determine whether Ramp-Up schools implemented the program's key components as intended (research question 2), the study team examined the responses to other interview, focus group, and survey

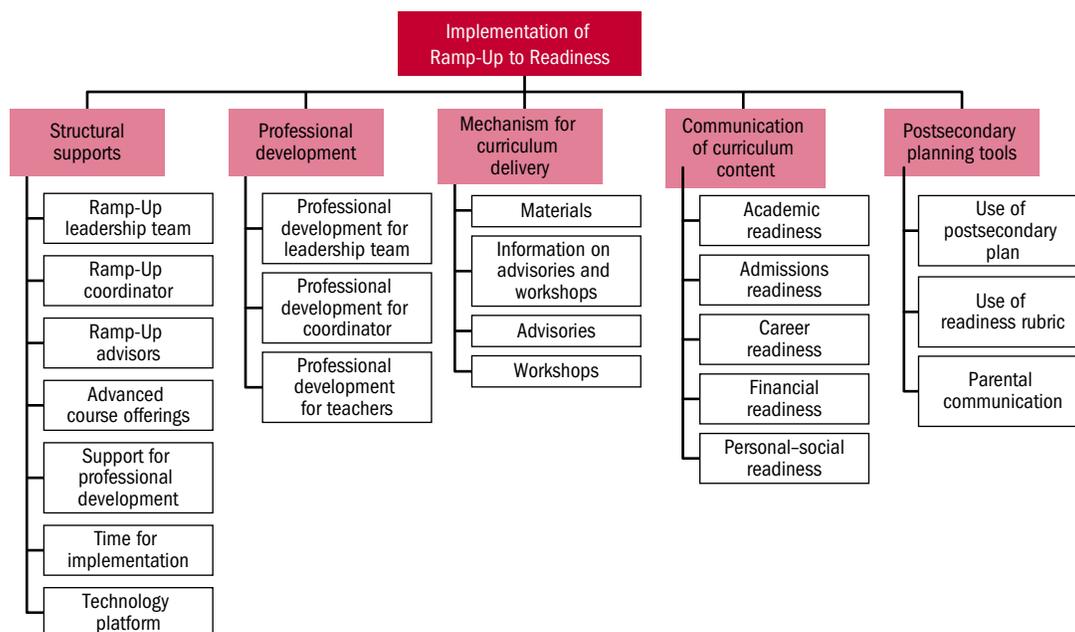
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**Box 1. Data and methods (continued)**

questions for the presence or absence of Ramp-Up activities in schools. These coded data were aggregated into an overall fidelity index and separate fidelity indexes for program components. Finally, the study team identified major themes from the responses of focus group members and interviewees in Ramp-Up schools about the program's strengths, limitations, and challenges to implementation (research question 3).

**Main components and subcomponents of Ramp-Up to Readiness**

Source: College Readiness Consortium, 2012.

**Note**

1. Items on the student survey had different response scales. To aggregate across items, the numeric responses were converted to z-scores (representing the scale value in standard deviation units about the grand mean).

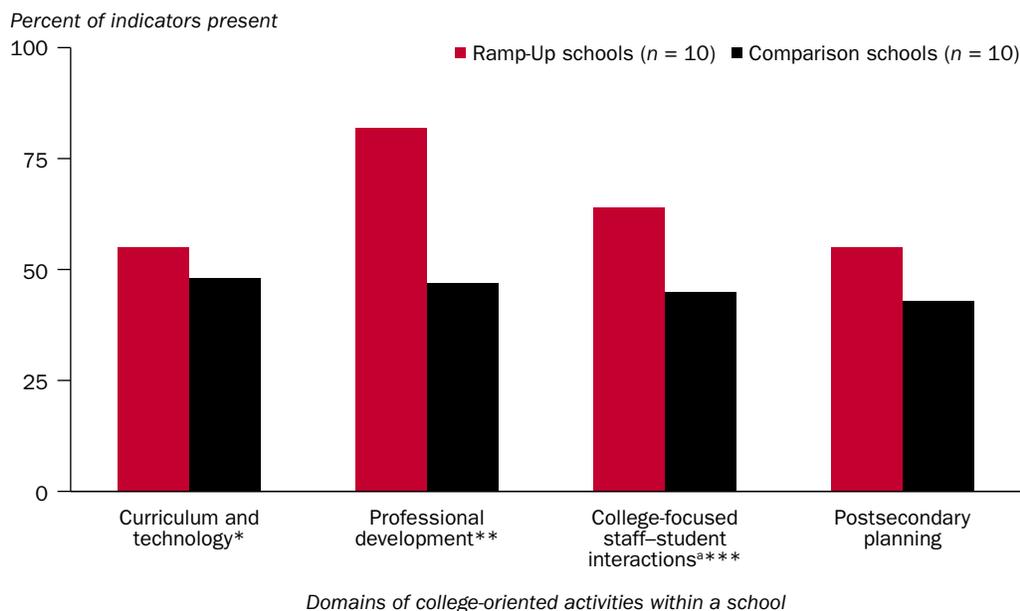
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(in different school structure and process domains) and as well as provide students information on all five dimensions of college readiness.

**Supplemental supports offered by both Ramp-Up and comparison schools.** Many supplemental supports were found in both Ramp-Up and comparison schools, such as opportunities to participate in dual enrollment programs, Upward Bound, financial aid and scholarship nights, college tours or visits from college representatives, and seminars for juniors and seniors. Interviewees from Ramp-Up and comparison schools stated that participation in these supports is voluntary.

**College readiness activities by staff in Ramp-Up schools and comparison schools.** Staff in Ramp-Up schools engaged in more college readiness activities than did staff in comparison schools. Specifically, staff in Ramp-Up schools enacted more college-oriented curricular and technological supports (such as providing more advanced courses and establishing a technology platform for postsecondary planning), participated in more professional development related to college readiness, and had more interaction with students regarding college readiness than did staff in comparison schools (figure 2). Although staff in Ramp-Up schools engaged in more postsecondary planning with students than did staff in comparison schools, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant ( $p = .08$ ).

**Figure 2. Staff in Ramp-Up to Readiness schools engaged in more college-oriented activities than did staff and students in comparison schools, 2013/14**



\* Difference is significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* difference is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* difference is significant at  $p < .001$ .

a. Calculated using responses from the student survey. One Ramp-Up school and one comparison school did not administer the student survey to students.

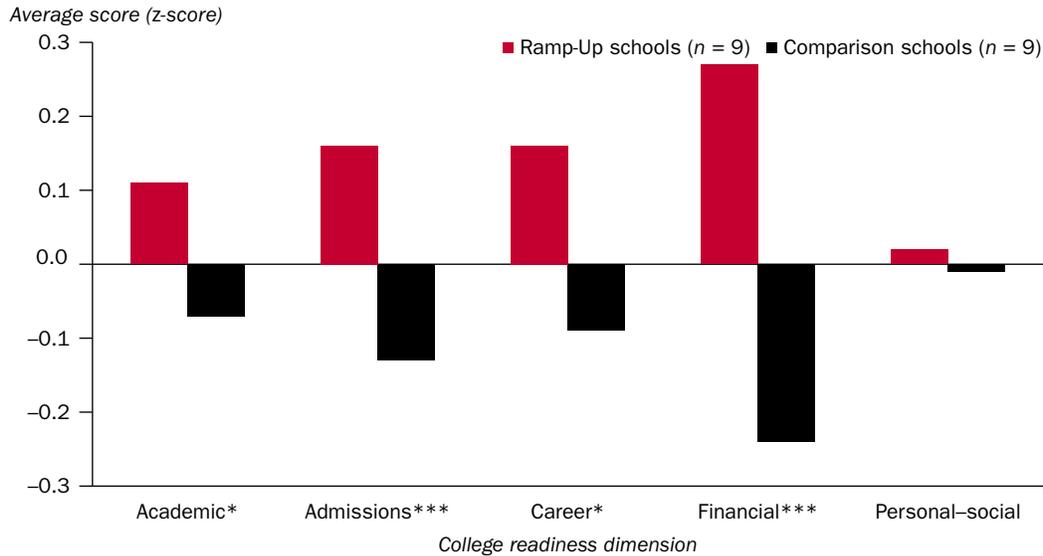
**Source:** Authors' coding of staff responses during interviews and focus groups, extant documents and data, and student survey responses.

**Emphasis on the five dimensions of college readiness in Ramp-Up and comparison schools.** According to student survey responses, students in Ramp-Up schools perceived more staff emphasis on four of the five dimensions of college readiness (academic, admissions, career, and financial) than did students in comparison schools (figure 3). Students in Ramp-Up schools perceived no more staff support for personal-social readiness than did students in comparison schools.

**Overall, implementation fidelity among Ramp-Up schools was adequate, but fidelity varied across program components**

All 10 Ramp-Up schools had overall fidelity indexes in the adequate range (see box 1 for an explanation of cutpoints established by the program developers). However, some schools fell below the cutpoint for adequate implementation on two of the five components (figure 4). All 10 Ramp-Up schools adequately developed an implementation team to guide and support implementation, participated in professional development, and facilitated Ramp-Up advisories and workshops on the five dimensions of college readiness to students throughout the school year. The component that proved most difficult to implement was the use of the postsecondary planning tools: only 2 of the 10 schools met the cutpoint for adequate implementation. In addition, the student survey data in one of the schools suggested that the staff did an inadequate job of conveying the curriculum to the students. The students in this school perceived staff-student interactions related to the five dimensions of readiness to be less frequent than expected by the program developer.

**Figure 3. Students in Ramp-Up to Readiness schools perceived more staff emphasis on four of the five dimensions of college readiness than did students in comparison schools, 2013/14**

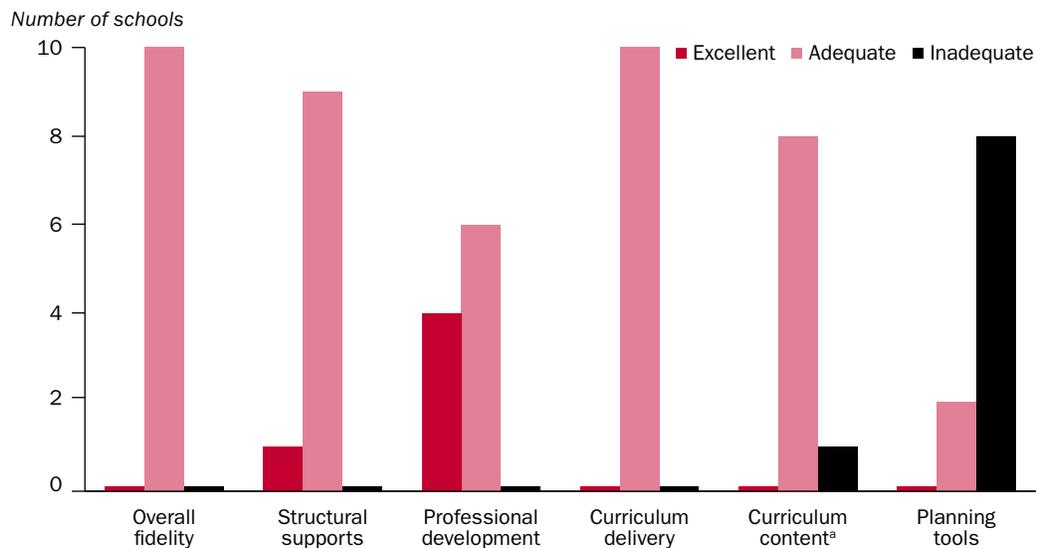


\* Difference is significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* difference is significant at  $p < .001$ .

**Note:** Means are based on 651 students in nine Ramp-Up schools and 1,050 students in nine comparison schools (those schools that administered the student survey). Scores for observed support were calculated using responses from the student survey. One Ramp-Up school and one comparison school did not administer the student survey. Student survey items had different response scales, necessitating conversion of numeric responses into standard deviation units (z-scores).

**Source:** Authors' analysis of student survey data.

**Figure 4. For Ramp-Up to Readiness schools, overall implementation was adequate, but implementation scores varied by program component, 2013/14**



**Note:** See box 1 for cutpoints for inadequate, adequate, and excellent implementation.

**a.** The indicators that constitute this component are from the student survey, which 1 of the 10 Ramp-Up schools did not administer.

**Source:** Authors' analyses of data collected from interviews and focus groups, staff and student surveys, and information from the program developers.

**Staff from Ramp-Up schools viewed Ramp-Up's structure, delivery model, advisors' guide, and instructional approach as strengths of the program but indicated that some students were unable to relate to Ramp-Up's goals or materials**

Staff from Ramp-Up schools viewed the curriculum, staff materials, and focus on five dimensions of college readiness as strengths of the program. However, they also noted that some students did not relate to the materials used in advisory sessions and workshops and that not all staff were willing to assume additional responsibilities.

**Ramp-Up's perceived strengths.** In focus groups and open-ended items in the staff survey, staff frequently mentioned the following as strengths of the program:

- **The structure of the curriculum.** Program activities were centered on the five dimensions of college readiness.
- **The delivery model.** The curriculum was implemented through a combination of short group advisory sessions and more in-depth workshops, spread across the school year.
- **The clarity of the advisor's guide.** For each group advisory and workshop, the guide provided a specific objective, a list of additional aligned resources, and opening and closing reflections.
- **The practicality of the advisory sessions.** Advisory sessions on academic and financial readiness provided a clear introduction to aspects of college that are seldom considered by students.
- **The emphasis on student engagement.** Discussion was the key form of instruction during group advisory sessions and workshops.
- **Information on postsecondary planning.** The program provided advisors with a process and tools that students could follow to develop their postsecondary plans.

**Ramp-Up's perceived weaknesses.** When asked about weaknesses of the program, school staff responded with the following critiques:

- **Students could not always relate to program materials and content.** Some materials (videos) feature individuals with whom students in Ramp-Up schools could not identify. For example, students in the mostly rural Ramp-Up schools could not identify with challenges expressed by students from urban areas.
- **The curriculum lacked information about two-year colleges.** Students in rural areas had difficulty relating to the program's focus on four-year institutions rather than two-year or technical degree programs, which students in rural areas are interested in because they offer training in specialized skills that are in high demand locally.
- **Some videos were poorly produced.** Staff also mentioned instances in which the poor production quality of videos used in advisories distracted students from the content of the lesson.

**Perceived implementation challenges.** Staff in Ramp-Up schools mentioned experiencing two general challenges in implementing Ramp-Up:

- **Insufficient time for sessions.** Some staff mentioned that their school's master schedule did not accommodate the 30-minute blocks of time needed for group advisory sessions.
- **Lack of staff buy-in.** Some staff resented being assigned additional responsibilities and being asked to teach material that was outside their area of expertise.

### **Implications of the study findings**

Many school and district administrators with the opportunity to adopt Ramp-Up have asked what the program is and how it differs from the programming already in place, whether the program can be implemented in schools like theirs, and whether there is evidence that the program has an impact on students. The findings from this study directly address the first two of these questions.

- ***What is Ramp-Up and how does it differ from other college readiness programs?*** Staff in comparison schools took a traditional approach to college readiness. That approach involved offering optional college-oriented supports or college-level courses to students who identified as college bound and having a guidance counselor inform students about separate programs for which they were eligible. Ramp-Up schools placed a greater emphasis on college readiness through the program's developmental and collective approach. Ramp-Up requires the majority of teachers to lead advisory sessions and workshops, thereby providing guidance to all students and presenting them with information on multiple dimensions of college readiness.
- ***Can Ramp-Up be implemented in schools like ours?*** Ramp-Up implementation requires schools to take a developmental and collective approach to college readiness, and staff in some middle schools and high schools may resist assuming additional responsibilities of leading advisory sessions. The schools in this sample that were assigned to implement Ramp-Up did so generally with adequate fidelity in the first year but struggled with using Ramp-Up's planning tools. Staff in most Ramp-Up schools reported not having enough time to lead students through the planning process, which entails recording and saving students' postsecondary plans, monitoring students' progress on those plans, and communicating with parents about those plans. Staff also mentioned positive aspects of the program, such as clear and useful content, advisor materials that are clear and easy to follow, and an instructional approach based on discussion. At the same time, school and district administrators in rural areas may want to consider whether their students will disengage if the focus places too much emphasis on readiness for a four-year college without also discussing other postsecondary pathways, such as two-year colleges. Based on staff feedback about implementation challenges, school and district administrators may need to make additional efforts to secure staff cooperation for the program and may need to alter their school's master schedule to allow for 30-minute advisory sessions every week.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study has three main limitations. First, the data are from schools located mostly in rural areas of Minnesota that volunteered to implement Ramp-Up. Implementation findings may not generalize to schools in other settings, schools serving other student populations, or schools forced to implement the program. Second, the study team used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to calculate fidelity indexes for Ramp-Up components but was unable to obtain information on why schools struggled with certain components. Third, instances of missing data prevented comparisons among subgroups within Ramp-Up schools. Although variables missing from more than 40 percent of the sample were excluded from the analysis, results from analyses using extant and student survey data sources should be interpreted with caution.

## **Notes**

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1. The states in the REL Midwest Region are Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.
2. The second study addresses the question of the program's immediate impact after one year of implementation. The report from that study is forthcoming.
3. Upward Bound is a federally funded program that offers grants to colleges and school districts to provide supplemental tutoring, guidance, and assistance to disadvantaged youth and children whose parents never attained a bachelor's degree. The supplemental support is intended to help participating students enroll and succeed in college.

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