Introduction

“College-for-All” (CFA) has become a prominent theme in 21st century education. This movement encourages all students to pursue post-secondary education. Since today’s labor market increasingly rewards higher education credentials, CFA is an appropriate policy.

However, there are two problems with CFA as currently construed: a hefty portion of high school graduates are not academically prepared for credit-bearing college courses, and high school graduates who seek entry into the workforce instead of college are under-served by the system.

To the first problem - that students are academically unprepared - : while 90% of the Class of 2004 enrolled in four-year colleges within eight years, only 47% completed a B.A. degree within that time. An additional 20% completed an alternative credential such as an associate’s degree or a certificate (unpublished ELS analyses). College completion is even lower in two-year colleges: only 20% of students who enroll in a community college eventually receive a B.A., and only 53% receive any credential whatsoever (Rosenbaum et al., 2016).

Many factors contribute to these low college completion rates, but lack of warning about academic under-preparation is a prominent one. High school graduates assume that passing a high school exit exam and fulfilling graduation requirements translate to adequate preparation for college. Upon enrollment, however, many students fail the college placement test and land in non-credit-bearing remedial courses, which add time and tuition for courses that do not count towards a degree (Rosenbaum, 2001; Kirst and Venezia, 2003). The misfortune is that students rarely have any warning that the placement test may prevent them from entering college-level classes (Rosenbaum et al., 2010).

To the second problem – that CFA does not support work-bound students - many educational reform organizations encourage “college and career readiness,” as if the same skills were needed for both. Achieve and ACT are exemplary in describing the terms. Achieve, an organization devoted to college completion, defines career-ready as having “the English and math knowledge and skills needed to qualify for and succeed in post-secondary education” (2014). The ACT similarly assumes that, since college is required for any decent job, "career ready" is equivalent to "college ready." Often, college-readiness is determined by passing an academic exam, such as a college placement test. The truth, however, is that many programs, often in community colleges, confer marketable credentials without the high level of academic skill required for entrance into B.A. programs.
What is to be done?

Florida’s College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI), implemented as a mandatory program in 2013, has made progress in solving the first problem but has room to improve in solving the second. FCCRI administers the state’s college placement test (the PERT) to high school juniors to assess how close they are to being college-ready. If students come up short, they spend their senior year in math or English college-readiness courses (CRS). The FCCRI model implies that achievement in English and math is the key to “college and career readiness.”

The FCCRI understands college and career readiness in similar terms to Achieve and the ACT:

Students are considered college and career ready when they have the knowledge, skills, and academic preparation needed to enroll and succeed in introductory college credit-bearing courses within an associate or baccalaureate degree program without the need for remediation (2014).

Thus, in practice and in theory, FCCRI targets college readiness exclusively, and assumes that the same standards apply to occupational tracks.

Project and Method
In this paper, we examine early program effects of the FCCRI by analyzing teachers’ views of the FCCRI’s effectiveness. We explore whether these views differ by district or school attributes. Below, we describe unnoticed post-secondary options that may bridge the “college and career readiness” gap and provide valuable career options for students who are not “college-ready.”

We surveyed a cohort of teachers in Spring 2013 (the first year of the mandatory program) and again in Spring 2014. The survey sample consisted of 225 CRS teachers in 113 schools in 42 out of the state’s 65 districts, drawn from a random sample stratified by district size and performance. The strata included all possible combinations of small, medium, and large districts, and high, middle, and low performing districts.

The surveys asked teachers to evaluate the reform’s effectiveness on its five goals, which are:

- Alerting students to their level of college-readiness in 11th grade
- Helping students understand the importance of testing at the college-ready level
- Helping students select 12th grade courses that improve their college readiness
- Helping students develop realistic post-secondary plans
- Helping students to test college-ready on the PERT before they leave high school.

Teachers were also asked open-ended questions about the model’s effectiveness.

Our analyses are based on these surveys. Although a later study will analyze school records to discern whether the program reduces the need for remedial courses, teachers’ early views are an important marker. These teachers have first-hand knowledge of what students experience and how
they respond to the FCCRI.

Findings
Early qualitative data on program effects indicates that most teachers believe the FCCRI is effective: 75% rated the FCCRI as moderately effective or better at achieving the program's five goals. In the open-ended questions, many teachers reported that the goals of improving college readiness are worthwhile. Teachers indicated that FCCRI had improved academic alignment for college-bound students by alerting students to gaps in their academic skills and providing a way to narrow them. Teachers also felt that students with college plans benefited from this intervention, just as the reformers had hoped.

However, many teachers criticized the FCCRI for not serving students who did not plan to attend college or who were too far below college-level academic skills to consider enrolling in college. Nationally, about one-third of high school graduates do not enroll in college immediately after high school graduation (NCES, 2015). Teachers noted that the goal of college-readiness seemed irrelevant to such students.

Although these teachers had been selected to lead CRS courses because of their strong records as academic instructors, many of them felt that their high schools needed to place greater priority on career preparation. Specifically, while only 30 percent of the teachers held that college readiness should be a higher priority in their schools, 50 percent believed career readiness should be, as well. Although the program’s name claims to address college and career readiness, many teachers saw no "career readiness" component, and they reported that the FCCRI brought little benefit to students who planned to enter the workforce immediately. To the open-ended questions, teachers expressed a desire to know more about other post-secondary options they could suggest, and ways students could pursue them, even if students had low-test scores.

Recommendations
Given the above findings, our research team concludes that programs such as the FCCRI are necessary but insufficient: they serve some, but not all, students. Several interventions – one of which Florida has put in place – would go a long way towards correcting this imbalance.

- Highlight credential options that don't require college-level academic skills

Not all college programs require college-level academic skills. Many certificate programs, offered by many colleges, consist of short sequences of courses (less than 2 years) that prepare students for a specific occupation, such as a medical-assistant or computer-support technician.

In a separate study, our team conducted interviews with college faculty in Illinois and California, who reported that their occupational certificates only required 8th to 10th grade-level math and English. Similarly, other research finds that many occupational programs do not require Algebra II, high-level writing skills, or academic skills above 11th-grade level (Tucker, 2013). Analyses of national data indicate that, while academic test scores predict B.A. completion and higher earnings among B.A.s, they do not predict certificate completion or higher earnings among certificate holders (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). Indeed, some certificate programs are non-credit bearing, and
they rarely require students to pass placement exams. Associate degree courses are more variable: although they rarely require academic skills above 11th-grade level, enrollment usually entails meeting college readiness standards on a placement exam (Rosenbaum et al., 2016, Tucker 2013).

Unfortunately, high school teachers seldom realize the different levels of skills required for certificates. When asked in focus groups if they helped struggling students to select less challenging programs in community college, many teachers reported that they were not aware of any such programs (Lou Jacobson, email May 5, 2016). Teachers who mentioned jobs that might fit their students’ interests and capacities did not know that community college certificate programs often prepare students for these occupations.

Why does this information gap exist? One reason is that certificates have become valuable only in recent years. National data from 2000 indicated no earnings payoff for certificates and associate degrees, but 12 years later (2012), certificates were found to increase earnings by 13%, and associate degrees by 22%, over high school diplomas (Rosenbaum and Ahearn, 2016).

A second reason is that community colleges can be difficult to navigate; their websites are unclear about program options. Despite the general finding that certificates do not require placement exams, this is subject to variability, and community colleges often describe entry requirements in vague or ambiguous ways. Consequently, even if high school teachers took the time to learn about program options, the great variation across colleges and programs means they would need to check the details for each specific program in each college their students might attend.

Perhaps the primary reason teachers are unaware that certificates do not require college-level academic skills is because this fact is not generally acknowledged. The FCCRI’s language about college-level academic skills reflects national rhetoric. The program’s purpose is to warn students that they are not ready to for B.A. programs and to help them become ready. However, this important warning simply does not apply to certificate programs.

- **Create college scorecards that include certificate programs**

Students who think they are work-bound would benefit from information about certificate programs. Florida has created a college scorecard (www.smart-college-choices.com) that provides career outcomes for each program in each state college. The website identifies four outcomes for graduates of each occupational program, one year after program completion: the number of graduates, the percentage who are employed, their average earnings, and how many are pursuing additional education.

Our research team used this website to compile statewide outcomes for sample occupations in each of the 3 credential categories (Figure 1). We found that, in some certificate programs, graduates are employed at rates of over 80 percent and earn more than $32,000 during the first year post-credential. Moreover, many sub-B.A. graduates continued their education later - that is, certificate programs were not dead-ends. Florida’s scorecard demonstrates concrete ways in which even those with lower academic skills can benefit from college programs.

- **Know the Options**
Our nation could do a better job of informing high school teachers and students about certificate programs that lead to good jobs and a living wage, and often require less time, less money, and lower academic skills than a B.A. degree. The Florida scorecard and national data illustrate that certificates have become a valuable option (Rosenbaum, et al., 2015). The FCCRI unwittingly conceals this possibility with its singular focus. Many students who are unprepared for "college-readiness" in B.A. transfer programs are still "career-ready" to attend community college and earn certificates with good payoffs, without taking remedial courses. Parents, teachers, and students should become well versed in the full array of post-secondary options.

**Conclusion**

College-For-All reflects a world in which living wages often require college degrees. There is, however, no earnings payoff for attending college but leaving without a credential (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). Florida’s initiatives make a good start: FCCRI helps college-bound students become better prepared, and Florida’s college scorecard identifies alternative college pathways to meaningful workforce participation. Bringing these two programs into the same conversation would be an important next step.
References
Carnevale, A., Jayasundera, T., & Hanson, A. (2012). Five ways that pay along the way to the BA. Washington, DC: Georgetown Public Policy Institute.

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<th>Credential Type</th>
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*College credit certificate programs may have more strict academic requirements, especially in the health field.*