

ONE-SHOT DEAL?

Students' Perceptions of
Assessment and Course
Placement in California's
Community Colleges

Executive
Summary

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Executive Summary

Given the pressing need for more students to earn certificates and degrees in the United States, policymakers and education leaders have dedicated substantial resources to increasing the percentage of students who are prepared for postsecondary education. In these national and local efforts, however, student voices have largely been absent.

This report examines the attitudes and beliefs of students concerning a key point of transition from high school to college: the assessment and course placement practices and policies used across California's community colleges for incoming students who graduated from high school within two years of attending college. The student perspectives are drawn from 28 focus groups that included a total of 257 students at five community colleges. Researchers also completed interviews with 12 counselors at the five community colleges and conducted a survey of matriculation officers across the state, with 73 of the 110 community colleges responding.

Findings

The study revealed a wide gap between counselors' hopes regarding student experiences of assessment and placement on the one hand, and students' perceptions of these practices on the other. While colleges have set up matriculation processes that encompass such facets as orientation, counseling, assessment, and placement, students, by and large, viewed the practices as a one-shot deal. The assessments they were required to take had a direct impact on whether or not they could take college or transfer-level classes, but they did not believe that the tests were connected to the academic work they had recently completed before graduating from high school.

At the community colleges, the students typically walked into a testing center, took a test, received a printout of their results, and registered for courses—usually on the same day. For most of them, the process was over at that point. Many students did not meet with a counselor to discuss their test results, course-taking options, or an educational plan. Those students who did not perform well on

the assessments described being disappointed and frustrated once they learned how much time they would have to spend taking basic skills classes that did not count toward a certificate or degree.

The study also found substantial variance in assessment and placement policies statewide, as well as confusion among students about the policies at their colleges. Local policies regarding the waiting periods for students to retake their assessments ranged from no waiting period (immediate retakes) to three years. Colleges varied in the “multiple measures” they used in addition to test scores to determine course placement—and many counselors did not know what these measures were or how they were used. Cut scores—the test scores acceptable for degree-level classes—varied across the state. Some colleges accepted placement scores from other colleges, while others did not. And the levels of basic skills classes were different across the state as well.

These findings must be framed by the acknowledgment that the community colleges were operating under stringent budget conditions before the economic recession; they have lost staff and programmatic resources during the downturn, and it is likely that funding for matriculation services may continue to deteriorate. It is also important to note that it was not the purpose of this project to examine effective matriculation programs in individual community colleges—of which there are many. Even without those caveats, though, this study’s findings call into question whether individual colleges have the resources to adequately inform prospective and incoming students in their local areas about their unique assessment and placement tools, so that those students can prepare for, and navigate within, college effectively.

Many of this report’s recommendations would be more effective if the colleges could agree upon common policies and practices and communicate one unified message clearly to prospective students. Especially in this time of fiscal crisis, coming together could save money and increase efficiencies; it does not make practical sense for students for policies to be so locally based and idiosyncratic. That idiosyncratic nature demands a personal touch that is currently impossible due to funding constraints. However, creating systemwide changes is difficult because of a lack of governance authority at the state level.

Recommendations

Given the students’ perception of assessment and placement as a one-shot deal for which they are largely uninformed and unprepared, our recommendations are directed toward developing more seamless, longer-term processes that engage high schools and community colleges in aligned efforts, as well as toward finding better efficiencies.

1. Work across systems to ensure that assessment and placement are part of an overall process, *not* a one-shot deal.

Assessment and placement should be part of a continuous process of learning—one that starts in middle or high school, ends once students complete their intended path in higher education, and is a transparent and seamless part of students’ educational experiences.

- The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the California Department of Education should work together to develop strategies and programs to engage middle and high school students early in activities that help them identify their readiness for community college and understand the costs of not preparing.
- The Chancellor’s Office should develop a statewide interactive website to provide prospective and incoming students with clear information about placement opportunities statewide and opportunities to prepare for them. This requires more uniformity across colleges in terms of policies and practices.

- Community colleges should pilot different approaches for conveying assessment and placement information to high school students and determine which ones are most effective.

2. Experiment with innovative practices in student services and instruction.

Many interviewees in the colleges suggested that the fiscal challenges the colleges now face may provide an opportunity to implement more streamlined, effective, and cost-effective processes to improve student success.

- Assessment developers need to develop new and better diagnostic instruments for assessing college readiness. Once these assessments are available, the state should create incentives for colleges to adopt them and for high schools to offer diagnostic testing opportunities directly to high school students.
- The community colleges should encourage experimentation with delivery systems for counseling services and information to leverage limited resources and have maximum impact for the least-prepared students.
- California's community colleges should pilot innovative practices for improving and accelerating students' progression through basic skills.
- The legislature should provide funding to build administrative capacity at the state level to assess the return on investment of the various approaches recommended in this report.

There are plenty of reasons why improvements will be difficult to make. The fiscal crisis, the wide range of programs across the community colleges, and the history and realities of local control are but a few. However, the constrained fiscal environment, combined with a statewide and national imperative to increase student success in college, may offer opportunities to try new approaches. Moreover, students deserve clearer messages, information, and activities that connect their high school and community college experiences. Through its approach to assessment and placement, the California Community Colleges system can play a strong role in providing these links.

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