ONE-SHOT DEAL?

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

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Acknowledgments

This study analyzes a system that has undergone much public scrutiny in recent years and that is currently facing substantial fiscal challenges. Aware that people within the community colleges are working extremely hard with diminishing resources to provide student services, we were careful to include their insider perspectives as well as those of people outside the system. Similarly, we strove to frame our findings and recommendations in an appropriate and balanced way.

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Introduction

The California Community Colleges system, with an enrollment of about 2.9 million students annually at 112 colleges, is the largest system of postsecondary education in the world. Open enrollment policies at the colleges ensure that anyone age 18 or older can attend, and younger students can take courses as well. By providing this opportunity, California has, year after year, opened the doors of higher education to a substantial portion of its young population. The state has been less successful, however, in preparing high school students to succeed in college-level courses and ensuring that those in college complete their postsecondary educational programs.[1]

Several studies, including our own previous research, have examined student perceptions of the transitions and barriers between K–12 and postsecondary education systems. These studies have recommended better alignment of coursework and assessments between the two systems to ensure that high school students are better informed about and prepared for college-level academic work.[2] There is substantial work being done—in California and nationwide—to develop college readiness standards; expand concurrent enrollment programs; communicate clearly about the key cognitive strategies necessary for postsecondary success (e.g., analytical thinking); improve student supports; and implement other approaches to improve students' postsecondary readiness and success.

This report focuses on assessment and placement processes, pivotal pieces of this picture because they determine which level of courses students will be placed in when they begin community college.

This study had two main purposes. One was to examine and describe the set of policies and practices that shape assessment and placement in California's community colleges. The other was to hear directly from students—whose voices are crucial yet generally missing in the policy process—about their assessment and placement experiences. We then compared the policies' supportive intent with the reality of the students' experiences—as well as with observations from counselors and matriculation officers—to draw conclusions about how the policies and practices may need to be adjusted.

Unquestionably, the assessment and placement process involves very high stakes for students. Whether students are placed immediately in college-credit or transfer-level courses in English and mathematics[3] or are instead required to start with basic skills courses has a major impact on students' trajectories. Course placement

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[1] A survey of assessment results in California's Community Colleges found that 83 percent of community college students placed in remedial-level mathematics, and 72 percent placed in remedial-level English. See California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2009).

[2] See, for example, Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003).

[3] Not all courses require prerequisites or placement testing.

affects not only how quickly they can earn a certificate or degree—a factor affecting the cost of their program of study—but also their likelihood of completing a credential at all.

Studies show that fewer students who place into basic skills courses complete their intended educational paths than do students placed in transfer-level courses. Those starting with basic skills courses who do complete a certificate or degree tend to take longer than their peers who are college ready. Notably, some studies have called into question whether remedial education is worthwhile at all, since even students who seem to need more basics may have better outcomes without remedial courses (Jenkins, 2010).

With so much riding on assessment and placement, it is important that students know the requirements early in their high school years so they can master the needed knowledge, skills, and cognitive strategies. They need ways to gauge their level of preparation and get the support they need—in high school and in college—to succeed. But such seamless processes do not appear to be the norm. On the contrary, community college students describe assessment and placement as something they encounter for the first time upon arrival at the college. They describe an isolated event that happens one day with minimal to no advance information. They walk into a testing center and take a test that seems disconnected to any recent academic work they had in high school. They receive a printout of their results and then register for courses. Many do not meet with a counselor to discuss their test results, and believe they are on their own to determine course-taking options. Thus, while counselors and matriculation officers have set up a continuum of services, most students believe that matriculation services are *a one-shot deal*—something that happens over the course of one day and is never revisited.

Their stories make it clear that although the assessment and placement processes are crucial to students' engagement, perseverance, and ultimate success, students hear little about them in high school. They arrive at community college knowing next to nothing about what to expect, and, thus, are unprepared to affect their own outcomes.

We have directed our recommendations toward developing a more seamless, longer-lasting set of processes wherein high schools and community colleges align their efforts toward informing and preparing students. In addition, during this time of scarcity, we focused on finding and recommending better efficiencies. That is admittedly difficult, since what students most want is more one-on-one time with counselors, an expensive intervention.

The Study's Approach

Despite many studies about the placement assessments,[4] little is known about students' related perspectives and experiences. Unanswered questions include:

> » Do incoming students—particularly high school graduates—typically know that they will be assessed before they can enroll in rigorous college courses?

> » Do students prepare for the assessments, and, if so, how?

> » How do students describe the course placement process and its impact on their educational goals and achievement?

> » What are the areas of variation and consistency—in college practices and in student perceptions—across the state?

Addressing these questions is critical to understanding—and improving—how high school students prepare for college and how colleges serve underprepared students. To find answers, our research included two components. First, we conducted focus groups with students at five community colleges throughout the state, with a primary focus on students not more than two years out of high school. (See the appendix on page 25 for a full description of the methodology.) Students were asked about their experiences with assessment and placement practices at the colleges and about their high school experiences related to college preparation. Secondly, we interviewed counselors at the five colleges and also surveyed matriculation officers across the state (total of 73 colleges), basing the questions we asked on preliminary findings from our student interviews. Throughout the paper we incorporate student quotes and identify their colleges with A, B, C, D, or E and the classes they were in for the focus group with designations such as "transfer," "non-transfer/basic skills," and "ESL." Since we used focus groups to gather

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[4] This research did not study the effectiveness of the assessment and placement instruments. We did not address whether the assessment instruments or the cutoff scores used at the colleges are valid or reliable. These are important questions requiring further research, but they are not the focus of this study.

information from students, we often cannot provide exact numbers regarding how many students experienced particular concerns or frustrations. In order for an issue to merit becoming a finding, it had to be discussed in multiple focus groups with general agreement.

The California Context

California's community colleges face the challenge of accurately assessing a large number of students who enter college at a wide range of readiness levels and with diverse academic and career interests. Under the local, decentralized governance structure of the community college system, each of the 112 colleges bears the financial and administrative responsibilities of assessing students in three areas: English, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL). Each is responsible for selecting or developing its own assessments and determining the "cutoff" scores that correspond with various levels of course placement for students.

Given this structure, a large number of instruments is used across the system, though a small core of assessments is used most consistently statewide (Brown and Niemi, 2007).[5] Some view these variations as important, given different student populations served and the need for local autonomy. But the system's use of multiple placement assessments causes problems. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2010) reports that the variations generate:

» a lack of uniformity, comparability, and mobility from one community college to another;

» expenses related to the retesting of the same students who attend multiple institutions; and

» difficulty generating success algorithms across the state for research purposes.

In addition, having different assessments at its various campuses across the state makes it difficult for the system to inform prospective students about common readiness levels needed for success in all California community colleges.[6]

As a step toward addressing these problems, the Chancellor's Office is exploring the feasibility of incentivizing the use of a small number of assessments systemwide by offering those assessments to the colleges free of charge. In exchange, colleges would need to agree to include their test data in the soon-to-be-developed Assessment Warehouse. The system hopes to achieve cost efficiency by negotiating a price break based on testing instrument volume. Under this approach, colleges choosing not to participate could continue to offer locally selected and purchased instruments, but they would then continue to bear their own costs (Perry, n.d.).

Besides minimizing the number of different assessments across the system, the Chancellor's Office envisions this centralized approach as a means to:

» develop a secure, central data repository for community college and K–12 test data;

» provide an assessment portal through which community college counselors could access K–12 test results, transcript data, and college test data; and

» allow for the development of algorithms of placement success, based on test scores and the highest level of courses students have taken in that subject.

Prior to the Assessment Warehouse, the Chancellor's Office launched the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) in 2006, as part of its strategic planning process. Developed as additional student support when the required course levels for an associate's degree in mathematics and English were raised,[7] the BSI also responded to concerns that too few students would qualify for credit-level courses. With an overall goal of improving student access and success, the BSI has two main activities: 1) providing supplemental funding to every college to address basic skills needs; and 2) providing training for faculty and staff in the effective

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[5] See also Legislative Analyst's Office (2008) and Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment (2008).

[6] The variations in placement assessments across the state make it difficult to develop testing instruments outside of the community college system that might be relevant for placement, such as K–12 tests, the Early Assessment Program (EAP), or transcript data. See Perry, P. (n.d.).

[7] In 2006, the Board of Governors adopted changes to Title 5 of the California Education Code that increased the minimum requirements for an associate's degree. The new requirements, effective as of fall 2009, state that students had to successfully complete a transfer-level English course (English 1A or equivalent), whereas previously the requirement had been a course one level below transfer-level English. In mathematics, the new requirements state that students must complete intermediate algebra (which is one level below transfer-level mathematics) or an equivalent course, whereas previously students needed to complete elementary algebra.

delivery of basic skills and ESL (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009a).

Another effort to improve college readiness and success, the California State University's Early Assessment Program (EAP), is now also being adopted in the California Community Colleges system. The EAP combines 11th-grade testing of college readiness with 12th-grade opportunities to polish skills: new high school courses in English and mathematics aligned with postsecondary (CSU and community college) entry level expectations; and professional development for high school teachers that is aligned with postsecondary expectations.

In another approach to improving student transitions, the Foundation for the California Community Colleges (FCCC) has funded the design or conversion of 23 Early College Schools in California. These schools provide structure and support for broad populations of students to enroll in college courses while they attend high school and the opportunity to earn an associate's degree upon high school graduation (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2010).

Discussions are also occurring about whether placement test results should indicate a mandatory level of course placement for students. Technically, current placement results are not binding; students can theoretically enroll in courses at the level they choose. Yet, as this study found, many colleges have mechanisms in place to ensure that students select courses at the levels indicated by placement test results.

Challenges in a negative fiscal climate. The need for action to improve student success in California collides with the reality that colleges are already trying to accomplish more with fewer resources. Since this study began in 2008, Californians have suffered the consequences of a severe recession, including job losses, drops in income, decreases in property values and wealth, increases in debt, and cutbacks in public services. The state's key revenue sources—taxes on income, sales, and capital gains—have fallen off, and the resulting declines have thrown state budgets into disarray. In 2009, postsecondary education took a $2 billion hit, including cuts of about $680 million at the community colleges, $584 million at California State University, and $813 million at the University of California (Marcus, 2009, and Steinhauer, 2009).

Student fees shot up, with increases of 30 percent at the community colleges and 32 percent in the CSU and UC systems, while services and course availability decreased. In addition to raising fees, the postsecondary systems are furloughing employees, reducing course offerings, accepting fewer students, and reducing overhead costs by eliminating or consolidating positions (Wilson, Fuller, & Newell, 2010). Students across the state are facing more crowded classrooms, getting less access to faculty and counselors, receiving fewer campus services, and having difficulty getting into the classes they need to graduate.

Yet student demand for college has reached unprecedented levels. During 2008–09, enrollment at the community colleges increased by nearly 5 percent, to 2.9 million students—the highest in the history of the system and more than twice as high as the 2 percent funding increase the colleges received that year (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009c). Fall 2009 enrollments were down by about 1 percent from fall 2008, and course offerings were down by approximately 5 percent (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2010). For summer 2009, the Los Angeles Community College District canceled summer sessions at its nine campuses (Chea, 2009). That fall, the San Diego Community College District turned away about 18,000 students and dropped 600 classes. The Los Rios Community College District in Sacramento saw an increase of 5,000 students, yet reduced courses by 4 percent (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009c). In December 2009 at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, the number of students seeking to register for spring 2010 was so high that the online system crashed, leaving students to stand in line for two hours to register the old-fashioned way, by hand.

These fiscal challenges are not new. Higher education institutions faced similar circumstances during the recession of the early 1990s and 2000s (Wilson, Fuller, & Newell, 2010). Many community colleges have routinely enrolled more students than the state has funded. But the budget cuts for 2009–10 may have an unprecedented impact. This year the California Legislature, aware that it was passing a budget that underfunded the community colleges, allowed the colleges greater flexibility in the use of state funds. This flexibility language relieved colleges from adhering to state regulations

concerning assessment of incoming students, counseling in relation to their educational plans, and placement into appropriate courses. As a result, colleges could choose not to do a formal assessment of student readiness for college-level courses or to provide students with an educational plan. The full effects of these changes remain to be seen, but they are already creating challenges in effectively meeting the needs of incoming students.

Improvements such as those we recommend in this study will be extremely challenging for the system to implement in this environment of budgetary crisis and program instability. Yet the adversity of the environment underscores the urgency of ensuring that more students become ready for college while in high school, that community college practices are easy to navigate for incoming students, that processes for placing students into classes are efficient and effective, and that students are placed in classes that will help them reach their educational goals.

Moreover, as interviewees in the colleges suggested consistently, taking innovative action now to implement more streamlined, effective, and cost-effective processes would not only help improve student success but also make more efficient use of scarce resources.

Findings

This section highlights our findings on student perceptions and experiences and conveys information from our interviews with counselors and surveys of matriculation officers. Findings are presented in four categories: 1) preparation of high school students for community college; 2) assessments of incoming students; 3) counseling; and 4) post-assessment confusion and frustration among students.

1. Preparation of High School Students for Community College

One goal of the assessment and placement process is to ensure that students are steered to courses that are appropriate to their level of preparation. Previous research studies in California have found that, based on placement test results, over 83 percent of incoming community college students place into remedial-level mathematics (with 61 percent placing two or more levels below college-level mathematics), and 72 percent place into remedial-level English (with 38 percent placing two or more levels below college-level English) (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009b). In the focus groups, we asked the community college students several questions about their high school experiences and how well prepared they thought they were for college courses. The vast majority of students expressed frustration about what they perceived to be low expectations in high school for their academic abilities and a lack of information about community colleges.

Low expectations for academic ability. A few students (often those who had not placed in basic skills classes) said that their high schools prepared them for the academic work they were experiencing as college students. For example, one student qualified for transfer-level classes upon entry into the community college:

"My high school was all about prepping for college. So they would have classes just on prepping for college, and all my teachers would basically say, 'You need to study for this and do your best and score the highest.' So I was pretty well informed." [College C, transfer]

The vast majority of these students, however, experienced low expectations in high school, and they often had low expectations themselves for what they could achieve academically. In many cases, students said they were not encouraged to take difficult courses of study:

"My high school was just mostly concerned with getting us out of high school. All of my teachers are kind of surprised that I went to college." [College C, transfer/ English 1A]

"I didn't have anyone during my high school years pushing me, [saying] 'You need all this because when you get to college, if you don't know it, you're going to start from rock bottom.'" [College D, non-transfer/ student success]

Another student said that she wished she had been told that all college-bound students need to take the challenging courses required for UC and CSU (that is, the a-g course requirements):

"They don't tell you that the a-g requirements [university eligibility requirements] are required

[to prepare for community college]. After you graduate from high school, you figure that out: 'Oh, these classes they told me were options weren't actually [just] options.'" [College D, non-transfer/student success]

Since students knew that they could attend a community college even without a high school diploma, many didn't think they needed to prepare much beyond passing high school courses. Consistent with previous research,[8] many of the students, in hindsight, held themselves responsible; they said they wished they had applied themselves more, taken more advanced classes, and learned more about what to expect in college.

Many students also reported that their high school's culture of low expectations extended into college. As one student said:

"[My college counselor] told me to just take easy classes. She said, 'Let's get you settled. Take it easy, work your

way up. Then after you get back into it, take as many hard classes as you want.'" [College B, basic skills]

Counselors and students both reported that if students were on the borderline between two levels of courses, counselors often suggested that students take the easier course. The counselors who advocated this practice stated that they wanted to increase the chances that students would succeed in the course. Yet many counselors and students indicated that low placement tends to increase student frustration and may negatively affect persistence.

Lack of information about community colleges.
Many students said that they had not been told much about community colleges while in high school and that they did not notice a community college presence—visits by college counselors, for example—at their high schools. Students also indicated that the information they received about colleges was mostly about four-year institutions:

"[In high school] I never saw any representatives from any city colleges. I saw university reps, I saw military, I saw everybody else but them." [College D, non-transfer/learning community]

"I think high school spent more time preparing me to take the SAT test than for how to enter college." [College A, transfer/English 1A]

Many perceptions students had in high school about community college were incorrect or misguided:

"At my high school, they said junior college is at the bottom. I always thought junior college was for people who really didn't care about school and weren't going to do anything with their life." [College D, non-transfer/learning community]

The few students who mentioned being involved in college outreach activities—particularly college visits—found those helpful.

"[The community college outreach program to my high school] was really helpful. I got to know where the campus was. I didn't know where it was before, but I'd heard of it. So I came, and I really liked it." [College C, non-transfer/learning community]

Promising Approaches in the Community Colleges

Improving high school students' understanding of the rigor of community college—and the importance of preparing while in high school—is difficult and complex. A fundamental issue is the structural divide between K–12 and postsecondary education. But the challenges are magnified by the long-term and current underfunding of California's community colleges as well as by the colleges' local governance approach, which complicates the development of systemwide programming or coordination.

Yet local development of programs may also facilitate innovation and regional collaboration with school districts. The purpose of this research project was not to examine effective matriculation programs in individual community colleges—of which there are many. Rather, we sought to gather information about variance and similarities in practices across the colleges and to better understand the perceptions and experiences of students concerning those practices. In the course of our research, however, we found many promising programs. Two other sidebars in this section highlight a few programs in the following key areas: bringing high school students on campus to take placement assessments that help them understand where they stand in terms of preparation for community college; and providing options for students to complete basic skills requirements in accelerated ways.

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[8] See, for example, Venezia et al. (2003).

Students reported that they were not informed about community college readiness requirements. They said they wished they had gotten early information about the kinds of academic challenges to expect if they enrolled at a community college, so that they could have changed their high school course sequence to prepare better.

Yet students in the focus groups consistently said they weren't sure what kinds of information or messages might have changed their high school behavior. This demonstrates the challenges community colleges face in communicating effectively with high school students about readiness. The realities of college may still seem remote, rather than urgent, to many adolescents. Moreover, "readiness" may depend on a student's education goals. Prerequisites for a student whose goal is a career certificate or associate's degree differ from those for a student planning to transfer to a four-year college. Community colleges are also concerned about setting the bar too high, since they do not want to discourage prospective students who may not expect to get an associate's degree or a certificate.

Every college surveyed for this study indicated that it engaged in some kind of outreach to high schools, with an average of 19 high schools targeted per college. Most of the reported outreach efforts target juniors and seniors. Fourteen percent of colleges indicated that they target 9th graders, while 99 percent said they target 12th graders. Survey respondents said that they engaged in the following activities to reach high school students: visited high schools more than once a year (83 percent); met with high school counselors and/or teachers to discuss college readiness or preparation issues (91 percent); brought high school students to the college campus to learn about assessment and placement requirements (87 percent); and conducted placement testing at the high school campuses (84 percent).

Promising Approaches: Bringing High School Students on Campus for Placement Exams

After the budget cuts of 2003, Santa Monica College developed an outreach program that engages high school students in activities that help them understand the preparation needed for community college. Originally called Fantastic Fridays, the program brings high school students onto the college campus for several activities, including taking the placement exam.

The college and each participating high school split the cost of a bus, an investment that ensures a level of commitment from the high schools. On the campus, students receive an orientation, a tour of the campus, some free time to mingle and feel the culture of a college campus, and some merchandise—from highlighters to backpacks—that prominently displays the Santa Monica College logo.

Most importantly, students are taken into a computer lab where they fill out online applications and take the placement exams in mathematics and English that are required by the college. The students receive the test results immediately, and at the Welcome Center afterward, the students talk with counselors about their results. Each student receives a placement chart that lays out the course levels, as well as a booklet that explains the majors at the college. Students refer to these materials as counselors talk to them about the requirements for general education courses in the community colleges and about requirements for the majors. Based on their scores, students are shown exactly how many basic skills courses they need before they can begin taking courses for college credit. The counselors let them know that they can come back after a couple of weeks and retake the test free of charge.

The college shares individual placement test results with high school counselors and aggregates results with the schools. The program has been such a success that it expanded from Fantastic Fridays to also include all other weekdays.

While the matriculation officers reported having all of these activities in place, it is unclear how specific the information is about such high-stakes issues as placement into college-credit classes. Also unclear is how many students were reached through these services. Given the comments reported in this study from students at the community colleges, what is clear is that many students did not get the intended benefit.

2. Assessments of Incoming Students

Most incoming students are required to take assessments in mathematics and English to place into courses that offer transfer-level credit. We asked students in the focus groups what they knew about these placement assessments prior to taking them and how well they had prepared. In general, students said they were uninformed about the assessments. Some did not even know there were such tests. Others were unaware of the stakes involved and/or unprepared for the tests' content and format. Nearly all experienced the assessments as discrete tasks that they had to complete, not as part of a process in an overall education plan.

Uninformed about the assessments and unprepared for the content and format. Many students said that they had heard (often from friends or family members) that they needed to take assessments when they got to the community college. Others said they did not know about the assessments until they were admitted. Generally, even the few students who said they received information from the college about the tests did not know much about what was on them beyond the general area of study.

> *"[The college gives] you a little packet, or a little piece of paper that's about that narrow, and it gives [just] two examples for both [placement tests]. So you have no idea what to study." [College E, non-transfer/student success]*

When asked, retrospectively, what they thought about preparation for community college when they were high school students, the students in the focus groups said they had not understood that there might be important reasons to prepare for the assessments. As a result, some students just did not bother to prepare. Others said that they thought the assessments were supposed to capture them at a point in time without the benefit of studying.

> *"We had [information about the tests], it was online and everything, and, actually, the counselor told me to go online and try the sample questions, but I didn't." [College E, non-transfer/student success]*

> *"Normally I don't really like to prepare for anything that has to do with things like placement tests, because in a way it feels like I'm cheating myself a little. I'm thinking, 'Well, I didn't know these concepts before the test, and all of a sudden they tell me that I have a test coming up. So let me prepare for it.' And it feels like I'm sort of cheating." [College D, non-transfer/student success]*

Fewer than half (44 percent) of the colleges that responded to our survey indicated that they provide practice placement tests for their students. Even in cases in which practice tests were available, however, many students did not know they were available, did not think they should prepare, or thought that preparation would not change their placement. Counselors at one college reported that they have a flier about practice tests but only hand it out if students specifically request it.

Many students indicated that the assessment they took was not connected to what they studied in high school. The tests were not seen as part of a process of preparation that began in high school, but as a hurdle unconnected to their previous studies. Even when students did not place into college-level courses, they often said that they thought the tests were "basic" or "easy" but that they had learned the information such a long time ago that they no longer remembered it.

Some of the main content-related difficulties cited by students concerning the mathematics assessments included the challenge of doing mathematics on the computer and the difficulty of the mathematics vocabulary for English language learner students. Many students said that the test covered topics they could and should have reviewed. Several student quotes illustrate the frustrations students had with test content:

> *"It wasn't a test of what you could do, but about what you could remember from a long time ago." [College A, non-transfer/basic skills]*

> *"I came straight after high school, and I was doing algebra and geometry. After you are at so high a level, to come to college and get an assessment on just all basics—you're really not in that mindset anymore. Even right after high school, you're on to bigger and better*

problems, so to come back in [and do] fractions— what are fractions?" [College B, basic skills]

Unaware of the stakes. Before taking the assessment, most students did not understand that their performance on it would determine which classes they would be able to take. Many did not realize that their performance would affect whether they would be able to get college credit for their classes right away or that it would affect how long it would take them to complete their education goals.

"I thought it was one of those tests that you take just to see what kind of field they were going to recommend. And then I found out it places you in classes." [College D, non-transfer/learning community]

Preparing for Placement

Interviewees stated that the factors important for adequate assessment preparation include knowing the purpose of the test; its format and procedures (whether it is timed, multiple choice, computer adaptive, etc.); its range of content; and methods for studying and preparing. Students in basic skills classes had much less clarity about these issues before taking the tests than did their counterparts in transfer-level classes like English 1A.
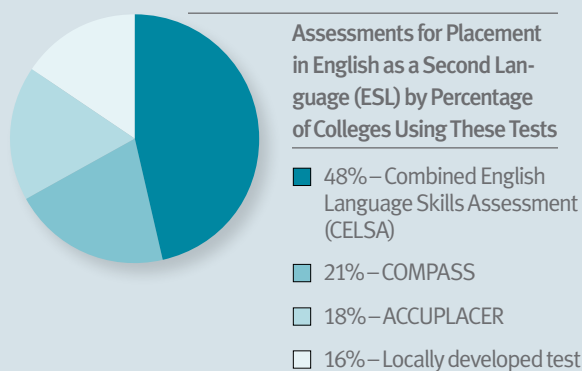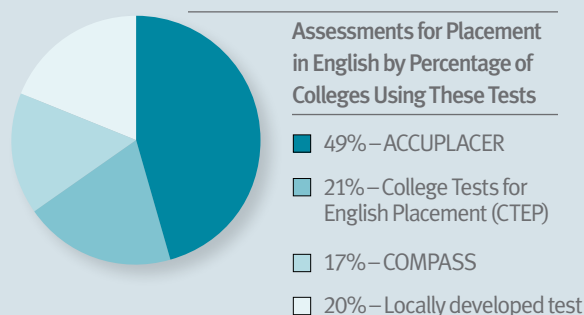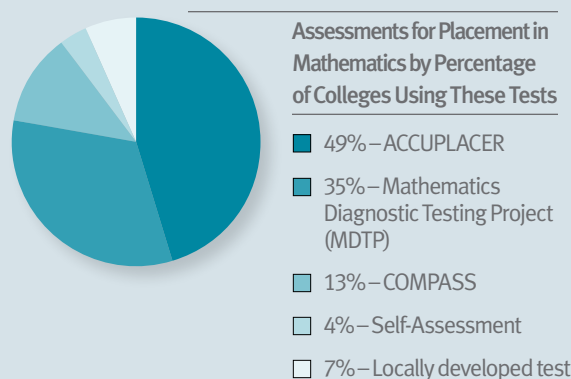
"[The woman at the test center] said, 'It doesn't matter how you place. It's just to see where you are.' Looking back, that's not true. It's really important." [College E, transfer/student success]

3. Counseling

Many community colleges require or advise students to meet with a counselor before being placed in their courses. We asked students about their experiences meeting with counselors, particularly concerning their assessment results, placement in courses, and course selection, but also in seeking guidance on their education plans generally. Many students reported frustration over long waiting lines and limited attention, and some said counselors conveyed low expectations about the level of courses the student could master. In general, students participating in programs that made them eligible for special counseling (e.g., Puente, Umoja, or athletics, which tend to have lower student/counselor ratios) reported greater satisfaction about counseling received.

Placement Assessments

Our survey of matriculation officers in the community colleges found variation in the placement tests used on different campuses but also some convergence around a few common assessments: 84 percent of colleges that responded indicated that they used one of two assessments in mathematics, and 70 percent said that they used one of two assessments in English (see figures). The ACCUPLACER is the most common assessment for both mathematics and English.

Assessments for Placement in Mathematics by Percentage of Colleges Using These Tests

- 49% – ACCUPLACER
- 35% – Mathematics Diagnostic Testing Project (MDTP)
- 13% – COMPASS
- 4% – Self-Assessment
- 7% – Locally developed test

Assessments for Placement in English by Percentage of Colleges Using These Tests

- 49% – ACCUPLACER
- 21% – College Tests for English Placement (CTEP)
- 17% – COMPASS
- 20% – Locally developed test

Assessments for Placement in English as a Second Language (ESL) by Percentage of Colleges Using These Tests

- 48% – Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA)
- 21% – COMPASS
- 18% – ACCUPLACER
- 16% – Locally developed test

Source: Survey of matriculation officers that was sent to all community colleges, with 73 of the 110 community colleges responding, 2009.

Students and counselors alike told us that they wanted counseling to be in-depth, consistent, and available to all incoming students prior to registration for classes, but students generally did not view counseling as part of a continuous process. Rather, they described a series of independent, uncoordinated events. Counselors themselves reiterated points they made in assessment discussions about feeling increasingly hamstrung as numbers of students swelled while funding for programs and staff shrank.

Such counseling challenges result not only from budget cuts, but also from the dictates of state policy. State law requires that 50 percent of all community college operating expenses be dedicated to direct classroom instruction. Counseling, therefore, has had to compete with other "non-instructional" costs for an increasingly limited portion of funds.

High student-counselor ratios. High student-counselor ratios throughout California's community colleges make it impossible for counselors to do what most told us they wish they could do: get to know students well, work with them to develop an education plan, and meet with them multiple times to select classes and help them track and meet their objectives. Counselors reported that with their limited one-to-one time, they focus on helping students make a personal connection with the college—"whether through the Puente club or with an instructor or counselor or with the janitor," as

Cut Scores

Each college sets its own qualifying test score level, meaning that students scoring below that level lack readiness for enrollment in college-credit courses. Across the system, these "cut scores" vary considerably. For example, in mathematics, cut scores to place into transfer-level mathematics courses ranged from 43 to 63 on the ACCUPLACER College Level Mathematics exam. Such variation in cut scores can send mixed signals to high school students across the state about what qualifies as college readiness. Some of the students we interviewed had received different placements at two different colleges based on the same test scores. More research is needed to understand the rationale for cut score variation as well as to determine the implications of such variation.

Common Assessment Across the System

Nearly all (97 percent) of the matriculation officers surveyed were aware of state-level policy discussions about the possibility of adopting a single placement test in each subject area for all California community colleges. While 62 percent of them personally believed that such a change would be beneficial, only 16 percent believed faculty and staff at their campuses would agree. The two benefits the matriculation officers most commonly mentioned were cost effectiveness and portability (i.e., students transferring within the system would not need to take another assessment).

Individualized Counseling

Community college students want individual counseling for placement advice, but many do not have access to it. While estimates from matriculation officers vary, about 41 percent of those surveyed said that less than half of students at their college gained individual access to an advisor or counselor to discuss placement results.
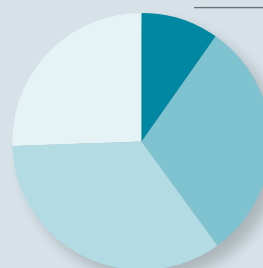
Variation in the responses of matriculation officers as to whether students met individually with a counselor

- At 10% of the colleges, less than one-quarter of students met individually with a counselor
- At 31% of the colleges, between one-quarter and one-half of students met individually with a counselor
- At 35% of the colleges, between one-half and three-quarters of students met individually with a counselor
- At 26% of the colleges, more than three-quarters of students met individually with a counselor

Note: These percentages reflect the estimates of matriculation officers about their colleges and are not necessarily based on counseling data at the colleges. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Survey of matriculation officers that was sent to all community colleges, with 73 of the 110 community colleges responding, 2009.

one counselor said, "if there is no connection, it's going to be hard for them to stick around."

In focus groups, students verified that their actual contact with counselors was fragmentary. Students did not perceive course selection, counseling, and education planning as integrated.

Many students were frustrated that they could not talk with a counselor between receiving their placement scores and registering for classes. Many counselors echoed this concern, citing the challenge of finding time to see every student during the registration period. Students at some colleges signed up to see counselors months in advance to get an appointment during the registration period, but that did not seem a viable option for incoming students. Moreover, many counselors stated that, this year in particular, many courses were already filled before incoming students took their placement exams.

Student Success Courses

With resources for one-to-one counseling increasingly scarce, California's community colleges are devising alternative ways to help entering students become college ready and succeed in college. Nearly all the colleges surveyed (97 percent) reported offering courses designed to provide students with college information and to teach them study skills and the habits of mind associated with college success. In addition, most colleges (81 percent) reported offering summer preparatory courses for incoming students. Matriculation officers reported that approximately 22 percent of incoming students participate in these programs, and recent research indicates that such "student success" courses do have positive effects on a student's chances of earning a credential.[9]

Long wait lines and limited attention. Given the limited funding for counseling, it is not surprising that none of the participating colleges had enough counselors to meet demand. At one college, a counselor told us that there were 17 counselors for 20,000 students. Ratios of 1 counselor per 1,000 students are not uncommon across the state (MDRC, 2010).

Counselor appointments that fill up weeks in advance are the norm at many colleges. Survey data showed that students' inability to get appointments when they need them was a source of frustration to counselors and students alike.

"It's hard if the classes are going to start and you don't know what classes to take because you can't get an appointment." [College B, non-transfer/basic skills]

Some students tried for walk-in appointments, expecting to have to wait. But one reported being exasperated when there was no way to tell how long the wait would be.

"I kind of wanted to have a one-on-one counselor [appointment], but there were no appointments, and you had to sit there for hours. They didn't tell you if it was an hour, two or three hours—just sit there and wait to see a counselor. I didn't have the time to do it, so I had to just get whatever [courses] I could get." [College B, non-transfer/basic skills]

Students also expressed frustration that their sessions with counselors were so short. They felt that counselors explained too little about the meaning of their assessment scores and did not clarify how those scores were linked to their course placement.

"They don't go over [the test result] with you. They just give [the score] to you." [College D, non-transfer/learning community]

"They should at least guide me through some classes that I wanted to take. The counselor just asked me, 'What classes do you want? Sign this paper.' I was out of there in ten minutes." [College B, non-transfer/basic skills]

"You have a question, and the counselors just give you a website. You're like, 'Well then, what are you here for?'" [College C, non-transfer/learning community]

More satisfaction with dedicated programs. Students were most satisfied with counseling experiences focused on particular communities, such as international programs, athletic programs, Puente, Umoja, and career programs. Students said that counselors within these programs better understood their individual situations and goals, were more available to them, and provided more useful advice. Because these programs generally have lower student/counselor ratios, their costs make them difficult to scale. Yet student comments suggest significant benefits:

"I used to have different counselors. Every single one was giving me different directions, and I was so lost. I didn't understand so many things. Then I got into the

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[9] See, for example, Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007); O'Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009, January 1); and Karp and Hughes (2008).

Puente program. The counselor I have is the best, and now I know my direction, I understand it, and it's really good." [College D, non-transfer/learning community]

Given that access to these programs is limited, some students believed it would be helpful if they were at least assigned to a specific counselor, a practice used by 13 percent of the surveyed colleges to help avert disjointed, unhelpful experiences. As one student said,

"I met several counselors, and each of them said something different. So you start to have your own opinion on the subject." [College C, ESL]

One of the ironies in our higher education system is that community colleges, which serve higher education's most at-risk students, have the worst student-counselor ratios due to budget constraints. In other words, the students most in need of comprehensive counseling are often least likely to get it.

Four-year universities with competitive admissions policies—that is, with students who have already demonstrated success—often have quite comprehensive, one-on-one supports for their students. For example, at Stanford University, all freshmen and sophomores have a pre-major advisor and a residential academic advisor. All students have access to a professional (career services) advisor, a departmental academic advisor (once a student declares a major), an honors advisor (for those in honors programs), a faculty research advisor (for those who wish to do independent projects), an overseas planning advisor (for those who study abroad), peer tutoring, writing tutors, oral communications tutoring, and academic skills coaching (one-on-one tutoring) (Stanford University, n.d.). In the community colleges, each counselor must play all of those roles for thousands of students.

At Stanford, moreover, the menu of services is targeted and differentiated; students at all stages of the readiness spectrum can receive special attention. And some of Stanford's services are almost free to the university, since they are provided by a cadre of volunteer faculty and graduate students.

4. Post-Assessment Confusion and Frustration

Many students remain confused about the assessment and placement process throughout their community college experience. They may feel stuck in the courses

they are taking, with no way to advance more quickly, even if they are motivated to do so. Both students and counselors voiced concerns that many students in such predicaments drop out.

Counseling Information

The counselors interviewed recognized the need to provide information to students in several forms, including websites, student success classes, and one-on-one sessions. Students agreed that many routine issues could be handled better online. That would free up counseling time, they noted, for the personalized, face-to-face meetings they preferred for discussing assessment and placement issues and for getting their related questions answered.

Problems students reported encountering or discovering after taking placement assessments included an uneven enforcement of rules, inconsistent policies across colleges in their area, and confusion about test-retaking policies. Students and counselors alike reported confusion about multiple measures, and that confusion added to the challenge for students who questioned their course placements. These issues caused considerable student frustration; some students ended up curtailing or abandoning their education aspirations.

Uneven enforcement of rules. Many students reported their perception that a college's rules are often unevenly enforced. Some said that their friends at the same college enrolled in classes without taking placement exams, while they were told they could not do so. Others said they knew people who enrolled in courses in their major without first taking the required English and mathematics classes.

Inconsistent policies across colleges. Students were also frustrated by a lack of consistency among colleges in their area. For example, at many community colleges, students receive a score promptly after taking the assessment, along with information about the level of courses into which they have been placed. At other colleges, students have to wait up to several weeks to receive their scores.[10] One student who waited two weeks for her scores explained the consequences:

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[10] It often takes several weeks for colleges to return scores on writing tests, which are scored by hand and cannot be scored instantly like the multiple-choice assessments.

"When I got the scores, I wasn't able to get into the classes because the classes were already filled up. So I had to basically wait a semester or go to a different college." [College E, non-transfer/learning community]

She did go to a different, nearby college—where she had to go through placement processes again because the second college didn't accept the scores from the first. The inconsistencies were most problematic for students who were shopping around for classes at different colleges in the same region and receiving different answers, or encountering different expectations, from the various colleges. For example, we spoke with students who started in a particular level of basic skills and worked their way out of that level at one college, only to place below that level at another. Whether this was due to different assessments or to variations in instruction and grading is not clear, but it was not an isolated experience.

Lack of clarity about policies for retaking placement tests. Many students in the focus groups were not sure whether or when they could retake a placement exam, how they would go about doing so, which materials they should study if they could retake it, and whether or not studying would make any difference.

Confusion about multiple measures and ways to challenge course placement. Students who were unhappy about their course placement did not know that multiple measures, not just their assessment results, can help determine placement. Many had heard of students who had challenged placements, but they were not sure how to do so. Some said they did not take action because by the time they realized that the course they had been placed in was too easy, the semester was underway and course sections were already full.

The community colleges are required to consider multiple measures[11]—not just the results of a single assessment—to place students into courses. For example, counselors can include such factors as how recently students have taken coursework in a given subject area and how high a level they reached in that subject in high school. But students are not always clear exactly which measures are used and how, and several counselors reported similar confusion.

In addition, while many colleges use high school transcript data as one measure, at one campus we studied, the lack of a high school transcript triggers the use of other measures and possibly more extensive choices. There, if students provide their high school transcript, they are more likely to be locked into the course placement identified through their assessment. If they do not submit their transcript, they are allowed more flexibility in their placement, and can meet with a counselor to decide together on the best placement. Three counselors interviewed about this policy find it confusing and counterintuitive, but they did not know who could change it.

Matriculation officers surveyed noted a wide variety of multiple measures in use across the colleges. Sixty-five percent of those responding cited questions embedded in their college's placement test as one type of measure—that is, the test opens with questions that ask the student, for example, how prepared he or she is for the test. This practice raises serious concerns, since asking students at the outset to reflect on their level of preparation could negatively influence students' views of their abilities and, consequently, could negatively influence students' scores.

One student, who said he wished his counselor had discussed test preparation with him, said that at the very least, he was taken aback by the embedded questions:

"I was surprised that, when you're starting the test, the test [asks], 'How prepared are you?' And then it says, 'Really Good,' 'Bad…' I put 'Really Bad,' because I was not at all prepared for the mathematics, and I did score very low. It was stuff that I would know, but I just couldn't remember how to do it." [College E, non-transfer/student success]

Students' frustration about their predicament. Of the students interviewed, most who were in the basic skills classes reported feeling frustrated as they began to understand how long it would take for them to "catch up." They were upset to be paying for what they felt were essentially high school classes all over again.

"[The class they put me in] was too easy for me. It was great to review, but I just felt like I wasted a whole quarter not doing anything." [College C, non-transfer/learning community]

"I didn't know what to expect. Now that I see what classes my scoring brought me to, I feel kind of

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[11] The California Education Code stipulates that a test score cannot be the only criterion used to place a student.

bummed out that [the classes] are not going to count towards my degree yet." [College D, non-transfer/ learning community]

"You spent four years in your high school, and they're judging your four years just off of that test. It puts you backwards." [College A, non-transfer/basic skills]

As noted earlier, although many students said that they had not been encouraged to take more rigorous

classes in high school, they often blamed themselves for not working harder back then:

"It's like, oh my gosh, I just basically wasted four years [in high school] by taking the easy track, when I should have taken the more advanced." [College D, non-transfer/student success]

"I realize there were so many classes that I should have taken [in high school]. I should have maybe added

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Problems with Transparency of Policies

Confusion, inconsistency, or lack of transparency result from many community college practices related to the assessment and placement of incoming students. Problems include:

Lack of course alignment. Many counselors discussed the extent to which lack of alignment in coursework between high school and college is problematic for students, who are often confused by common course names in high school and college when the courses themselves are set at very different levels. For example, a common complaint was that high school algebra bears little resemblance to college algebra. As one college counselor noted, many students come from high school and say that they have already taken calculus, but then do not score high enough on their placement tests to even take intermediate algebra, which is one level below transfer-level mathematics.

Confusion about multiple measures. While almost all the students said that they thought their test scores alone determined their course placement, the counselors we spoke with reported that, in accordance with state policy, other measures are also included in the calculation of course placement. Yet many counselors were not certain how multiple measures are integrated with the test scores at their campus, except in cases where students came in to challenge their placement score. In these cases, counselors said, transcripts, other documents, and student motivations or aspirations were considered. According to our survey, 65 percent of the matriculation officers estimated that their colleges included multiple measures within the computerized placement exam and automatically factored the measures into the assessment score. This is done, for example, by asking questions on the exam about student aspirations and level of preparation. About two-thirds of the matriculation officers estimated that the use of multiple measures helped students place in higher-level classes than would otherwise be the case.

Variation in retake policies across colleges. Variations in retake policies across colleges create confusion and coursework delays for many students. One variation example provided by our survey is that across the system, the mean wait time to retake a mathematics assessment was 160 days; the median was 73 days (responses ranged from 0 to 1,095 days). Responses for English were similar.

Variation in acceptance of scores from other colleges within the system. Student mobility is hindered when assessment results from another college are not accepted. Yet according to research conducted by the Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment (2007), only some of the system's colleges accept all scores. Some accept scores from colleges within the district or region, and some rarely accept scores from other colleges. The percentages that fall into each category vary by subject matter, but approximately 12 percent of colleges reported that they never accept mathematics placement test scores from other colleges, and approximately 14 percent reported that they never accept English placement test scores from other colleges.

a class to this semester, to that semester, but I didn't."
[College E, non-transfer/learning community]

Students also expressed frustration at the limited number of course sections available generally, and specifically at the basic skills levels:

> *"There are no classes. If you have a low assessment score, you're trying to get into classes you can take, and those classes are full. It's just really frustrating." [College B, non-transfer/basic skills]*

Basic Skills Course Enrollment

Matriculation officers estimated that, on average, 65 percent of students at their colleges enroll in the courses recommended by their placement. The estimates varied substantially, however, ranging from 25 percent to 98 percent across the state, suggesting that placement may be perceived as mandatory at some colleges and not at others. While placement cannot technically be mandatory, all of our survey respondents reported that their colleges use mechanisms to make sure that students enroll in courses sequentially. For example, some colleges block students who try to enroll in a course higher than the level at which they placed or without the required prerequisites.

Colleges offer, on average, three or more levels of basic skills classes in mathematics and English. More specifically, 74 percent offer two levels, and 83 percent offer four. Matriculation officers estimated that, on average, 32 percent of their students placed in the lowest level in both mathematics and English.

Slightly more than half (54 percent) of survey respondents said their college provides opportunities for students to accelerate their progress through basic skills. More research is needed to know how broadly these opportunities are made available, how students are informed of them, and how often they use them.

Impact on education aspirations. Not surprisingly, as students realized that they would need to take a year or more of coursework before they could register for college credit-level courses, many felt stuck or considered dropping out.

> *"At the beginning, you just think what you're taking is good, but then after a few days, you see how you messed up, and you can't reverse it." [College E, non-transfer/learning community]*

> *"If you take a placement test and find out you're one or two classes behind, that's okay—three years [to earn an associate's degree]. That's if you place right below transfer-level classes. If you place further down, you're going to be here for a while. And I think that's the community college's way. I see people that have been here, it seems like, forever and they're kind of stuck here." [College C, non-transfer/learning community]*

> *"You don't really know that it's going to take that much longer to transfer… If you put that in someone's mentality, they're going to be [thinking], 'Oh, it's going to take forever.' And that's when they say, 'This is not for me,' and they're going to drop out." [College C, non-transfer/learning community]*

Wide Variation

Survey respondents reported that faculty members are typically responsible for establishing assessment and placement policies in the colleges. Counselors implement those decisions. In our interviews and surveys, counselors and matriculation officers often questioned the effectiveness of their college's policies and practices. For example, we learned that one college requires students who place into the lowest level of "reading" to enroll in the same reading course—not different versions of it, but the same actual course—four times in a row before moving on to more rigorous coursework. Of the three counselors we interviewed at that college, none thought that was an effective policy; they all believed that it encouraged students to drop out, and none knew why it was implemented.

Another college requires students to wait three years before retaking a placement exam—meaning that, in effect, there is no real "retake" option at that college. The counselors we interviewed did not believe that this policy was appropriate.

While these are anomalies, they demonstrate the wide variation in policies and practices throughout the community colleges and, thus, in the challenges students encounter.

In California and nationally, many efforts are underway to develop instructional models that help students gain the basic skills they need to qualify for college-credit classes. These include identifying the specific academic deficiencies students may have (for example, in a specific aspect of mathematics that they may have learned several years ago) and helping them master those specific areas rather than requiring them to take a full-semester course. Other efforts include intensive classes, accelerated coursework, and targeted student supports.

Mathematics academy for incoming freshmen. At Cabrillo College, the Academy for College Excellence (ACE, formerly known as the Digital Bridge Academy) is an intensive program that aims to help at-risk students build confidence, become well-organized and effective learners, and ultimately move into regular community college courses. Cohorts of approximately 29 students begin with a two-week foundation course that emphasizes team building, communication skills, exploration of learning and working styles, self-efficacy, and motivation. The group then enrolls in a 13-week bridge semester that includes accelerated academic work and directed academic and personal support. At the core of the bridge semester is a project-based course in which students conduct primary research on a social justice issue (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, Wachen, & Heyward, 2009). Since its beginning in 2002, the program has transitioned more than 675 at-risk students into the college's regular courses. A recent study by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University examined nine cohorts of ACE students from 2003 to 2007. The study found that while more than two-thirds of ACE students tested two levels below college ready in math or reading, 80 percent passed associate degree–level English within two years. The strength of these results led to the addition of accelerated classes in 2009–2010 (Academy for College Excellence, 2010).

Accelerated courses in developmental English. Chabot and Las Positas Colleges have implemented accelerated, one-semester courses in developmental English. Research completed on five years of data at Chabot provides evidence that students in this accelerated class show greater success in English 1A than those who took the traditional two-semester, developmental sequence. The research also shows improved success for these students in other courses across the curriculum (Hern, 2010, and Hern, Arnold, & Samra, 2009).

Research at Las Positas appears to show that students in an open-entry, accelerated, one-semester course in developmental English were more successful than those in the traditional two-semester course. Students in the accelerated course were more likely to complete the class and go on to earn higher grades in English 1A. In addition, students who received higher reading scores on the placement exam (but below the cut-off score) were more likely to withdraw when enrolled in the two-semester developmental sequence. These findings are still preliminary, and are serving as the starting point for a collaborative team of English and counseling faculty to examine the English curriculum in light of student needs and success rates (http://www.facultyinquiry.net/teams/las-positas-college/).

Recommendations

This study found that students in California's community colleges generally experience assessment and placement not as a process for which they begin preparing in high school, but as a single event—a one-shot deal, with pivotal consequences, for which many feel uninformed and underprepared.

These findings add to a body of research showing that California's K–12 and community college systems are not currently structured to support successful transitions from high school to community college for a large proportion of students. Because the systems lack alignment, the courses taught and tests administered in middle and high school are not connected to the knowledge and skills required in college.[12] Because cross-system collaboration and communication lag, students often get few, if any, signals about community college expectations. Many are unprepared, in part, because they never hear in advance what they are expected to know for community college readiness.

In this larger picture, students could move more successfully from K–12 to the community college system if the systems better aligned their content and strategies and forged closer links in terms of supports they offer students, especially as students transition between systems. But a major barrier to enacting closer, cross-system connections is the decentralized structure of the community college system, which operates less as a system than as a confederation of autonomous units. The community colleges' long history of local control does allow for the tailoring of curricula to meet local needs. But it also does students a large disservice by impeding the needed systemwide connections with K–12 education, including the alignment of policies, practices, pedagogies, and expectations. Students are often not "ready" because the systems lack coherent ways to signal to them what community college readiness means.

Local autonomy is important. But given how many students are not succeeding in their desired educational paths, and given state and federal initiatives pushing for greater student success in higher education, the authors urge California's community college leaders to work together to connect with K–12 and clarify and publicize their expectations for incoming students. Many of the following 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.

But creating systemwide changes is difficult because of a lack of governance authority at the state level. The Chancellor's Office is urging colleges to use common assessments, but the system office does not have the regulatory authority to change campus-level policies.

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12 See, for example, Venezia et al. (2003)

Only the colleges can voluntarily and collectively make these changes to benefit students. The large disconnects across the systems seem unlikely to be fixed in the short term, due to the state's fiscal crisis. Yet *particularly* in these difficult budget times, when educational services are limited, students need to receive clear signals—early in their high school career—about the importance of preparing rigorously for community college, and prospective students deserve a clear roadmap that will show them how assessment and placement can have real effects on their educational goals.

Community colleges already view matriculation services as an iterative process that seeks to support students in reaching their education goals.[13] Many community colleges are leading the way in developing, implementing, and testing innovative, student-centered reforms, as evidenced in the "Promising Approaches" sidebars in the "Findings" section of this report. Additional action can further strengthen the process for students. With an awareness of the challenges facing already underfunded and overburdened community colleges, we offer the set of recommendations below, grouped in two large categories: 1) work across systems to ensure that assessment and placement are part of an overall process, not a one-shot deal; and 2) experiment with innovative practices in student services and instruction.

Necessarily narrow, since they stem from this one study, these recommendations represent steps that can lead to the bigger vision of broad and deep system change supported by a body of research that now includes this study.[14]

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 that starts in middle or high school and ends once students complete their intended path in higher education. Educators in K–12 and postsecondary systems need to be conscious of each aspect of the process as they shepherd students through it. Students should not be distracted by the process itself;

rather, the mechanisms put into place to support their transition to college should simply be a matter of course, starting in the early grades and self-reinforcing across the systems. For example, counseling in middle and high school should reinforce issues of importance for the colleges (such as assessment and placement expectations), and college and high school standards should be explicitly connected so that students will have an early understanding of their level of readiness.

Community college professionals we interviewed believe the process has improved and become more integrated, though they say it is not necessarily transparent, even to all educators. The following recommendations suggest different ways through which students can receive more information earlier about community college preparedness and have access to relevant coursework and support.

> **Recommendation: 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 know where they stand in terms of community college readiness, learn ways to stay on track, and understand the costs of not preparing.**

At least by early high school, all students should be engaged in regular, ongoing processes that inform them about community college placement standards (as well as those of CSU and UC); provide them with diagnostic information (through assessments and other measures) about their preparation for community college coursework; and encourage them to improve their academic and career readiness through challenging classes and incentives. This is a shared responsibility between secondary and postsecondary education systems and state agencies.

Early outreach to high school students. Across the board, students interviewed for this study mentioned that they wished they had more information about community college earlier in their educational lives.

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[13] See the Riverside Community College website at http://www.rcc.edu/services/matriculation/index.cfm. As another example, Linda Michalowski, Vice Chancellor for Student Services and Special Programs for the California Community Colleges, in an email to chief matriculation officers at the community colleges, emphasized the importance of matriculation services "that you provide to help students be successful and attain their educational goals" ("Further Clarification about Matriculation," October 26, 2009).

[14] See, for example, Moore, Shulock, and Offenstein (2009) and Bueschel (2003).

Particularly when budget conditions are challenging and postsecondary education offerings are limited at every level, it is crucial that community colleges continue their outreach to high school students. We suggest expanding outreach as well as improving messaging, and targeting students earlier, by 9th and 10th grades at the latest. The specific focus should be readiness *for community college*. The goal is to change student understanding about the rigor of community colleges and to affect their course-taking choices early in high school—not to exclude students, but to ensure that all students have the opportunity to prepare effectively. Reaching that goal requires coordinated training and professional development opportunities for high school counselors, provided by partnerships between high schools and local community colleges.

High school curricula. As many studies have recommended, the high school curricula should be connected to community college expectations as a baseline. The connection should be clear in the academic core as well as in career and technical education, structured pathways, and concurrent enrollment programs. While not all students wish to attend college, the sequence of courses should be transparently connected. For example, articulation agreements can ensure a scope and sequence across high school and college. If aware of the sequence, high school students can make more informed decisions. Right now, the status quo is disjuncture. High school graduation requirements and the California High School Exit Exam are not linked to college readiness and success. Many high school graduates in this study will need two years or more of basic skills courses before being ready to take college-level courses—and no one is held accountable.

Assessments in high school. Early assessments of high school students concerning their postsecondary readiness can also help by providing diagnostic information about each student's readiness. The results would not only engage students, but help the system identify where resources need to be focused to address student gaps *while students are in high school*. In Michael Kirst's paper about the CSU Early Assessment Program (2010), he proposes ways to use the EAP not just as an indicator of CSU readiness, but as a common indicator of college readiness, including for community college. He also suggests that the program include earlier preparation efforts. While the EAP sends an important signal about college

readiness, he writes, it should also include scaffolded instruction and content in earlier grades so that students are prepared in advance for the 11th grade assessment. In addition, he recommends that the EAP incorporate an early warning assessment system, based on the California Standards Tests, in grades 8–10 and that modules from the EAP's writing course, now available only to 12th graders, be offered in earlier grades.

The idea of revising the EAP offers a good starting point for a conversation about whether California should have a common indicator of college readiness. The EAP model, however, has limitations relative to community colleges, since community-college-bound students generally need earlier interventions than those bound for four-year colleges. Moreover, four-year-university-bound students often receive additional signals of college readiness (such as the SAT/ACT and grades in a-g courses). Community-college-bound students often receive no other signals, despite being, as a group, the least prepared.

> **Recommendation: The Chancellor's Office should develop a statewide interactive website to provide prospective and incoming students with clear information about placement assessments statewide and opportunities to prepare for them. This requires more uniformity across colleges in terms of policies and practices.**

To assist prospective and incoming community college students, the Chancellor's Office should establish interactive online information and preparation opportunities for placement assessments and encourage all incoming students to take practice tests. The test preparation activities should be aligned with the main assessments included in the Assessment Warehouse. Creating statewide practice assessments would likely require moving toward more uniformity of assessments and cut-off scores across the community college system, since providing separate information and assessments for each college would be unwieldy and confusing for students.

The online features would provide information about the purposes of the assessments and their impact on the students' educational opportunities. In addition, the features could inform students of likely course placements associated with various scores—as well as the average

time to degree, based on the course placement. Over time, these online opportunities should include college readiness and matriculation issues more generally.

The Chancellor's Office should also work in collaboration with the California Department of Education to develop and add interactive features that lay out connected courses of study from high school through community college. This effort includes developing and providing clear information about community college readiness standards statewide and how they connect with and build from high-level coursework in high school. The website should include pathways (and samples of articulation agreements) featuring career and technical education and showing the high levels of mathematics and English readiness required for those options in the community colleges. The site could also connect to social networking sites that students already use.

Statewide online engagement would be an efficient way to bolster individual college outreach efforts concerning assessment preparation and postsecondary readiness, though the Chancellor's Office would need to pilot several strategies to determine the most effective way(s) to ensure that the information is used. The website's elements could build from efforts currently underway in the Chancellor's Office to work with the Academic Senate, matriculation officers, counselors, and others to explore opportunities for developing state-level support systems such as online assessments, counseling, and orientation tools.[15]

> **Recommendation: Community colleges should develop clear messages about assessment and placement, pilot different approaches to communicating this information to high school students, and determine which one(s) are most effective.**

While all colleges have information available (on their websites or through brochures) about placement tests, many high school students do not access the information, nor do they understand how the assessments may impact their educational goals. Colleges should clarify all key matriculation policies at the college level that affect course-taking and education goals. These policies include but are not limited to the use of multiple measures, assessment retake policies, challenge policies regarding course placement, the mandatory nature of course placement, and course acceleration opportunities. Colleges should develop clear messages and experiment with different approaches for communicating this assessment and placement information to prospective students. Possible pilots include:

» repeated dissemination of information through multiple channels, including flyers, college websites, emails, texting, social networking, and student testimonials;

» specific information about the costs of not preparing for college and not performing well on the assessments;

» practice testing and actual assessments on high school campuses;

» online practice testing on college websites;

» user testing and analysis of website information to gauge its accessibility and clarity for high school students;

» online educational modules that provide students with study guides exposing them to the format and content of the test; and

» working with local high schools to embed information into high school curricula.

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

Community college staff interviewed for this study emphasized that now is the time to develop and try new approaches. When colleges have excess capacity, they focus on increasing enrollment, since each additional student brings more state funding. Since enrollment is not a problem at most colleges right now, attention and energy can be focused on innovation.

> **Recommendation: Assessment developers need to develop new and better diagnostic instruments for assessing college readiness. Once diagnostic assessments are available, the state should create incentives for colleges to adopt them and to offer diagnostic testing opportunities directly to high school students.**

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[15] For recommendations about online opportunities for counseling and academic planning while in college, see the next category of recommendations.

Most of the placement tests used by the community colleges do not provide diagnostic information to the students to help them identify the specific areas in which they need the most support. In addition, there is evidence that current placement tests are not well connected to the key cognitive strategies necessary for postsecondary success, such as analytical thinking (Conley, Hiatt, McGaughy, Seburn, & Venezia, 2010). Better diagnostic instruments could be very helpful to students trying to understand why they are not considered college ready and to high school and college faculty trying to bring students up to speed quickly.

Examples exist of diagnostic assessments that could be used more widely. These include the Mathematics Diagnostic Testing Project of CSU and UC as well as the College-Readiness Performance Assessment System developed by the Educational Policy Improvement Center. More tests of this type need to be developed and validated. Once more such tests are available, incentives to adopt these instruments should be put in place. Given the decentralized nature of the community colleges, incentives tied to funding streams tend to be effective at influencing change at the local level. The Chancellor's Office's Basic Skill Initiative offers one example.[16] It remains to be seen whether similar success occurs with the Chancellor's Office's Assessment Warehouse and the implementation grants for the EAP.

> **Recommendation: Colleges should encourage experimentation with delivery systems for counseling services and information to leverage limited resources and provide the strongest possible support for the least-prepared students.**

Pilot different counseling delivery modes. Current resource constraints present significant barriers to a universal one-on-one counseling approach. Given this, a menu of alternatives should be considered and piloted to determine which types of information are most effectively provided by counselors, versus information

that could be most effectively delivered by other means. Options include interactive online counseling services (described in more detail below), college websites that are more student-friendly, "express" lines in counseling offices, text messaging for frequently asked questions, and the use of counseling assistants for routine questions. New policies adopted as a result of findings from pilots would then help to reserve face-to-face counseling time for the individualized needs that most require it.[17]

Pilot interactive online counseling services. The Chancellor's Office should consider developing interactive online counseling services for community college students statewide. The services could enable students to access general information about college policies; access their own educational history, assessment scores, multiple measures, and placement recommendations; develop their own individual education plan; and engage in step-by-step processes for educational goal setting. These services could also facilitate meetings with counselors and document students' goals and progress in ways that could be easily accessed and updated, so as to better address student needs over time. If appropriate, the online counseling services could be connected to the online assessment preparation services described in the previous recommendation.

> **Recommendation: California's community colleges should pilot innovative practices for improving and accelerating students' progression through basic skills.**

Efforts underway in California and nationally show the benefits of offering accelerated approaches to help students progress through specific areas of basic skills more quickly. Colleges should pilot different approaches that help students achieve the basic skills they need in the most efficient manner possible.

Accelerated sequences in developmental mathematics and English. Colleges should continue to develop instructional models that help students gain the

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[16] The Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) is a grant-funded initiative from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, which began in 2006 as part of the strategic planning process. The goal of the BSI was to improve student access and success. It used two approaches. One was to allocate colleges' supplemental funding to specifically address basic skills needs. This funding was guided by locally developed action plans documenting usage of the funding. The outcomes of the BSI are tracked using the Accountability Report for Community Colleges (ARCC), specifically the ARCC Basic Skills report. The other approach offered colleges a Professional Development Grant designed to address training needs for faculty and staff in basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009a).

[17] The Chancellor's Office is working on developing some statewide support systems, such as online orientation and counseling tools, which could help to free up counselors' time at the colleges.

basic skills they need to qualify for college-level courses through intensive classes, accelerated coursework, and targeted student supports. Efforts such as those at Cabrillo, Chabot, and Las Positas Colleges (described in the "Findings" section) are a few examples of the good work that colleges are already doing in this area.

Summer boot camps and course modules for targeted incoming community college students. The efforts to accelerate student learning should include intensive short-term "boot camp" approaches as well as evening and other sessions for students who work. Course options should include student success courses, accelerated modules in areas of specific academic preparation (probably in mathematics and English), and review of key concepts in mathematics and English (particularly for those who have been out of school for some time). This is a particularly difficult time for this recommendation, since summer offerings are being eliminated across the state. But it is important to determine how short-term modular approaches can help meet specific student needs.

Since the Chancellor's Office does not currently collect assessment scores or placement recommendations, doing so would be a first step in determining the effectiveness of the pilot efforts recommended in this report. The legislature could allocate resources for the Chancellor's Office to issue an RFP for campuses to run their own pilots (like Cal-PASS and the BSI), or colleges could form a voluntary consortium. Greater administrative capacity will also be important to assess the effectiveness of efforts already underway, such as the Assessment Warehouse and the EAP. Without the capacity to conduct evaluations and cost-benefit analyses, in the long run it will be difficult to tell what, if any, differences these changes will make.

Preparation for placement into college-level courses is closely related to the challenges of improving college readiness generally. That being the case, these recommendations are directed toward matriculation generally—toward ensuring that more students experience components of matriculation not as a series of one-time, disjointed events, but more as an integrated process that engages students in early preparation activities; provides practice tests and early diagnostic assessments; offers tailored online support, guidance, and career and educational planning, as well as in-person individual counseling; provides course placement through transparent policies and practices that students understand; and offers accelerated opportunities for students to fill specific academic gaps and otherwise complete basic skills more quickly.

Conclusion

This research study began with two main objectives: to describe current assessment- and placement-related policies and practices at community colleges across the state, and to provide a voice for students in describing their experiences leading up to and during community college with regard to assessment and placement. Those two components provided useful points of comparison and allowed us to identify areas where community college policies and practices are falling short in terms of their key purpose—student support.

We expected to limit our recommendations to assessment and placement policies in the community colleges. But then we heard how surprised and frustrated students felt to have seen years slip away after they realized how rigorous community college was, and we heard them describe the disconnect between the community college assessment and placement process and their own high school experience. We concluded that if our recommendations did not include preparation for community college generally, they would not be addressing the students' central concerns.

It is often the case that education policies and reforms that make perfect sense from the perspective of an elected official or an administrator end up needing adjustment once put into practice. In this report, we have attempted to provide corrective policy feedback by featuring student perceptions and experiences.

For years, policymakers in Sacramento have discussed reducing the number of placement assessments offered in the community colleges. Many at the colleges oppose that idea in the interest of preserving local control, but the majority of the matriculation officers surveyed and students interviewed for this study thought that it would be useful to have a more streamlined system with clearer expectations. This issue merits further debate and discussion.

The history and realities of local control join a host of other factors, including the current fiscal crisis and the wide range of programs and degree offerings across California community colleges, that make policy changes difficult. But, as interviewees consistently stressed, now is the opportune time to try new approaches. The urgency to increase enrollment, which in previous years took all available energy, is now absent. Instead, all eyes nationally and across the state are focused on increasing student success and persistence. To succeed in community college, students need and 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.

Appendix
Methodology

Data Collection

The research for this project was conducted in two parts. In Part One, researchers selected five community colleges at which to conduct field research. We collected qualitative data about student experiences with assessment and placement practices and information from counselors about policies and practices. Colleges were promised anonymity in return for their participation. The five colleges are located in the Bay Area, central California, and southern California. To ensure a diverse set of institutions, we selected them based on factors such as geographic location, student population (ethnicity and size of student body), and transfer rates.

To conduct the work, we developed protocols for student focus groups and counselor interviews and pilot tested the questions with students and counselors at one college. Questions were then refined and reorganized prior to conducting the additional field research. We worked with matriculation officers, counselors, and faculty at the colleges to set up student focus groups.

Since a major part of this project focused on the signals students receive in high school about assessment and placement, we wanted to focus on students who were within two years of high school graduation. However, we found that high participation required conducting most focus groups during class time, meaning that the focus groups included both older and younger students.

To learn whether there were differences in understandings, experiences, and information received by students who placed into different levels of courses, we met separately with students in basic skills classes, students in transfer-level classes, and students in ESL classes (though that design did not work perfectly at each college).
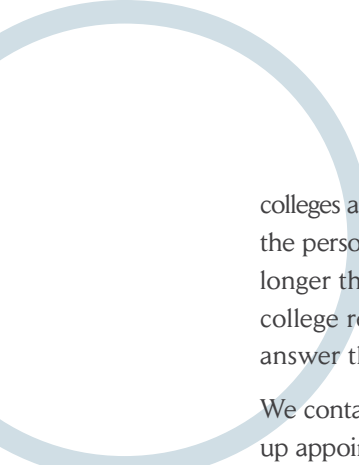
In all, we conducted 28 focus groups with a total of 257 students. Focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol, with questions focusing on the student experience with assessment and placement in the community college.

With counselors at each of the colleges, we conducted open-ended interviews. These were geared toward gaining a better understanding of the policies and practices related to assessment and placement at each college. A total of 12 such interviews were conducted.

We also reviewed the websites at each of the five colleges to determine the type and accessibility of information on assessment and placement practices available to incoming students.

For Part Two of this research, we used preliminary findings from the field research to develop a telephone survey, which we conducted with matriculation officers at all 110[18] California community colleges. The survey asked matriculation officers to describe the assessment and placement policies and practices at their college. We pilot tested it with matriculation officers at three

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[18] At the time we conducted the surveys, there were 110 colleges in the California Community Colleges system. In February of 2010, two former satellite campuses of Riverside City College became independent colleges, increasing the total number of colleges to 112.

colleges and made revisions accordingly. In cases where the person listed on the Chancellor's Office list was no longer the matriculation officer at the college, the college referred us to the appropriate individual to answer the questions.

We contacted each college at least three times and set up appointments for administering the survey. When an individual could not answer all questions, s/he referred us to the appropriate person who could. In total, we completed surveys with staff at 73 colleges (66 percent).

Data Analysis

Focus group and counselor interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. We developed a coding scheme to capture key themes and responses, then organized the data by these codes. Once analyses were done for each individual college, we created a template that helped us systematically examine trends and differences across the five colleges.

We used SPSS to code and analyze the survey data. We examined variation and trends for all colleges and also looked at different ways to "cut" the data to see if there were any interesting variations by types of college. ANOVA and Chi-squared analyses of surveys by region (North, Bay Area, Central, and South) revealed no meaningful differences. We conducted a separate analysis comparing colleges identified as minority- and Hispanic-serving institutions and those that were not. Again, no meaningful differences were found. Ultimately, we determined that the variation in the data was due to individual college differences and could not be attributed to the other factors we tested.

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