

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Community Colleges Rethink Placement Tests

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College-placement tests can make or break a student's career. [← Back to Story](#)  
Yet few students prepare for them, and there's little evidence to suggest the tests even do what they're designed to do.

Now, some community colleges are looking for alternatives. Some are switching to high school grades or revamping assessments, while others are working with high schools to figure out students' college readiness early so they have time to catch up if necessary.

"Our concern is that placement tests are really used to keep students out of credit-bearing courses, and they really are not reliable enough to make those decisions," said Stan Jones, the president of Complete College America, a Washington-based nonprofit organization. Despite those concerns, he said, colleges use the tests because "they are inexpensive. They don't take long, and there is a common belief that the tests will provide better information than they do."

To get a quick snapshot of incoming students' knowledge, community colleges commonly use the computer-based **Compass by ACT Inc.** and the **College Board's Accuplacer** . Results are used to determine which courses students can enroll in as freshmen. When students fail those tests, they are put in developmental or remedial courses and often don't get out. Concerns over the placement process are rising as new research challenges its predictive value and student success continues to lag.

The national nonprofit Jobs For the Future convened a group of experts on the issue last spring to discuss de-emphasizing high-stakes placement tests, changing those exams, and supporting students who are required to take them. "There are going to be multiple answers," said Gretchen Schmidt, a program director at JFF in Boston. "This is part of a broader conversation about reforming developmental education. It can't be considered as a stand-alone component."

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The push to get more students through college has policymakers looking closely at bottlenecks in the system. Developmental education is one of them. When students have to pay for classes, but don't receive credit, it can be demoralizing and hurt their chances of completion.

About 60 percent of recent high school graduates at two-year colleges take a developmental education course. Students who go right into credit-bearing classes have a 40 percent chance of finishing within eight years, while those who take a developmental course have less than a 25 percent chance, according to research by the **Community College Research Center** at Columbia University.

While state policymakers are attuned to placement concerns, many institutions continue to use the traditional tests because they aren't aware of the latest research and don't view the issue as a primary problem, said Melinda Karp, a senior research associate at the center. "They say, 'The test is imperfect, but I can't do better,' " she said.

It is largely an issue at community colleges, which have open enrollment, as opposed to four-year institutions with selective admissions policies. Resources are stretched, and a widespread change would take time and money.

Some, however, believe it is worthwhile to make changes.

Officials at Long Beach City College in California realized that students' high school transcripts were better predictors of college performance than traditional tests, based on a research project reviewing success in mathematics and English courses. So, this fall, it began using grade point average as an alternative placement method for some math and English courses.

"We fell victim to relying too heavily on one test, and students often don't know they have to take it and are not prepared," said Eloy Ortiz Oatley, the president of LBCC. "It doesn't mean the Accuplacer isn't a good instrument. It's just not giving us a complete picture of a student's capacity to perform."

Since the average student age at the **Community College of Baltimore County** is 29, administrators are not confident using dated high school grades to place students. Although the Maryland institution has not changed its placement criteria or tests, it has introduced a new approach to helping struggling students in English-composition classes get up to speed.

The college's Accelerated Learning Program puts developmental-English students in a credit-bearing class, followed by a second hour of instruction with the same teacher. Students also receive extra counseling on finances, work-life balance, and other obstacles. The school has found the intensive experience more than doubles the chance that a student will pass the credit-bearing class.

"We are no longer keeping students out of the credit course or isolating them with others who have weak writing skills. They are with stronger students," said Peter Adams, the director of the program, who is working with schools around the country to adapt the model. "This is a way to shorten the developmental pipeline."

## High Schools Partners

California has been at the forefront of working with high schools to expose students early to community college placement tests and using multiple measures for gauging remedial needs. The state's Early Assessment Program is given to high school juniors and used by most California community colleges for

placement.

For students who don't pass, it's a wake-up call, said Carolina Cardenas, the associate director of academic outreach and early assessment for the California State University system, which devised the program. "It's designed to work with students who were not ready so they use that senior year in a more productive manner," she said.

As of last year, Florida requires high school students to take its **Postsecondary Education Readiness Test**, which was developed in collaboration with local college professors to reflect what incoming students need to know in entry-level courses. Students are assessed in math, reading, and writing to discern if they are ready for college-level work.

With the move comes a potential for culture change in the schools, said Julie Alexander, the vice chancellor for academic and student affairs for Florida colleges in the state education department. "There is awareness that getting a standard high school diploma does not necessarily equal college-ready enrollment," she said.

Some campuses are sticking with the traditional placement tests but ramping up preparation. This year, the **Community College of Denver** published a 20-page workbook for students to review the material on the Accuplacer test, and set up free tutoring sessions. For those who end up in developmental education, professors do a first-day diagnosis to make sure the students are in the right level and figure out what additional supports are needed.

The first time Angelo Gallegos took the Accuplacer math test at CCD right after high school, he didn't take it seriously and scored at the lowest level. Not wanting to waste time or money in a remedial class, he worked four years before returning to school.

To prepare for the test the second time, Mr. Gallegos, 26, went to Accuplacer tutoring sessions on campus over the summer from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. up to three times a week and studied at home another three hours a night.

"I was highly motivated," he said. "I knew I had to take care of it."

When he retook the exam, he was placed in a credit-bearing class. Now, he is an honors student and one semester from graduating.

### **Bigger Issues**

Unlike Mr. Gallegos, most students do not take advantage of placement-exam help offered by colleges.

Recent research by the **Center for Community College Student Engagement** found only 28 percent of students surveyed said they prepared for the placement tests with materials provided by the college. In the institutional survey, 44 percent of the 187 colleges that responded offer some kind of test prep. Of those, just 13 percent make it mandatory for all first-time incoming students.

There is growing acknowledgment that students shouldn't take a placement test blindly, said Andrea Venezia, a senior research associate with **WestEd**, a nonprofit education research organization based in San Francisco. "If a student comes in and does worse than they thought, they may be told

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they have to wait a year to retake it," she said. "Some are shopping around to retake it faster elsewhere. ... It calls for a more systematic approach."

While much of the buzz now on campuses is about placement tests, the larger issue is about what schools do with the information, said Mr. Jones of **Complete College America**. His organization advocates Baltimore County's strategy of putting students in credit-bearing classes with support. He also suggests that colleges share data on remediation with K-12 educators so they can urge high schools students to be better prepared.

North Carolina and Virginia are two states taking the lead in changing the delivery of developmental education, along with placement tests. As students enter community colleges there, they are given a new kind of exam that is diagnostic. It pinpoints a student's weakness and tailors shorter, more targeted developmental education modules to address those gaps individually. When instruction is designed to meet students' specific needs, the hope is that they will be more engaged and productive than they would be sitting through a broad review course.

Said Jeffrey Krause, the assistant vice chancellor of public relations at Virginia Community Colleges: "When you look at the bold goals by the president and governor for college completion, the challenge of developmental education will have to be solved to get us there."

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