Assessing Developmental Assessment

Strengthening Student Success Conference
Strand: Keeping the Doors to Success Open
Thursday, October 13th, 2011
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The Problem

- Over 60 percent of entering community college and one-quarter of entering four-year college students are referred to developmental education.

- Students assigned to developmental education are less likely to earn a college credential.

- Developmental education is expensive:
  - Up to $2 billion per year at community colleges and $500 million per year at four-year colleges (Strong American Schools, 2008).
  - State expenditures in the tens of millions of dollars
Developmental education is minimally effective, at best.

- Dev ed is not effective for students near the cutoff point (Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2011)
- VA study found that students referred to dev ed but skipped it did just as well as similar students who complied (Jenkins, Jaggars & Roksa, 2009)
- Vast majority of students do not complete dev ed sequences to which they’re referred
In-Order Completion and Enrollment: GK

- Sample: 2001-2005 cohorts, tracked for three years

- Percentages in ( ) indicate skipping that level & enrolling in higher level

- Percentages in blue indicate total enroll, including skippers

- 10% total GK completion accounts for skippers who enrolled in a higher level and progressed
Poor dev ed outcomes led us to examine assessment and placement:

- Are the right or wrong students being assigned to dev ed?
- Do the assessments help us understand what students know/don’t know?
- Does passing the assessment predict success in college?
- Multiple studies: lit review; assessment/placement/progression at CUNY; COMPASS validity study; 8-state exploration
Opposing Forces Framework

- System-wide consistency vs. institutional autonomy
- Efficient vs. effective assessment
- Support of student access and progression vs. enforcement of academic standards
Consistency vs. Autonomy

• Centralized systems with consistent standards lessen confusion, frustration, inequity.

• Uncertainty remains about best policies, therefore colleges tend to resist central policy.
Trend towards Consistency

- NJ - adopted same instrument, cutoff scores, and exemption policies.
- NC, VA, and TX – all developing customized assessments for state and consistent policies.
- Out of 10 systems, only 2 (OR and WI Techs) have colleges set own policies.
Continuing Tension

• “It probably would be great if the whole state was consistent on placement testing and cut scores but what we are doing right now seems to be working well. I wouldn’t want to see our system thrown into chaos.” (Faculty, Oregon)

• “The pro is consistency across the state, and I can understand and appreciate that. The negative is that…all schools are different, and so standards – what we want our students to do – it would be nice to have some flexibility there ultimately.” (Faculty, North Carolina)
Efficient vs. Effective Assessment

• Nationwide:
  – Almost all CCs use standardized tests due to their efficiency
  – Yet admin. efficiency goes hand-in-hand with high rates of failure & attrition
## Placement Mistakes:
Using Test Scores Only, HS Achievement Only, Or Multiple Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Placement Test Scores Only</th>
<th>High School GPA/Units Only</th>
<th>Placement Test Scores PLUS HS GPA/Units</th>
<th>Test Scores, HS GPA/Units, Years Since HS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe error rate</td>
<td><strong>0.240</strong></td>
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<td><strong>0.213</strong></td>
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<td>Severe overplacement rate</td>
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<td>Severe underplacement rate</td>
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<td><strong>0.179</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.168</strong></td>
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<td>CL success rate (C or above), for those assigned to CL*</td>
<td><strong>0.670</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.708</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.734</strong></td>
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<td><strong>English</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe error rate</td>
<td><strong>0.334</strong></td>
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<td><strong>0.281</strong></td>
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<td>Severe overplacement rate</td>
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<td><strong>0.022</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.027</strong></td>
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<td>Severe underplacement rate</td>
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<td><strong>0.267</strong></td>
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<td>CL success rate (C or above), for those assigned to CL*</td>
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<td><strong>0.821</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.815</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.844</strong></td>
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</table>
Alternative Approaches

- NC, VA, and TX are developing diagnostic assessments
- Multiple measures approach at UW colleges
- Few examples of non-cognitive assessments used and only one with follow-up interventions
- Providing preparation for the placement test is a growing practice
- Early assessment is increasingly common but not many examples of specific academic interventions
Gain effectiveness but lose efficiency?

• “It’s really the colleges that have demanded quick, quick placement tests – we’re all in CCs trying to get students in the door yesterday and test them, advise them, put them in classes same-day. That’s our demand. And the registration agenda has given way to the completion agenda and success agenda, and so that means we have a little more room to change that foolish policy to have students do everything all in one stroke.”

(Faculty, North Carolina)
Supporting Access vs. Enforcing Standards

• Mission of community colleges is to be open-access
• But many are asking, “How low must we go?”
Trend toward Increasing Standards

- Increasing standards may reduce access
- UW 2-year colleges, CUNY, and University System of GA have increased cutoff scores for college placement
- GA tech colleges, VA, and NC are setting cutoff floor
- Different entry standards for different programs can provide access
CUNY Faculty on Cut Scores

• Perceived Academic Quality:
  “I am quite upset with the difference in the cut scores at the four-year and two-year institutions. . . That [lower cutoff] denigrates my program, my college-level material. It’s the same college-level courses.”

• Instruction Difficulty:
  “Right now there’s such a mix that it’s so tough to try to address all of these different needs. You don’t want to play to your strong students; on the other hand you don’t want to just play to your weak students. But what I find is that when there’s such a gap, it’s really difficult to know what happy medium to strike. And I do think it’s a matter of placement…I do wonder whether raising some of the standards a little bit might help with that.”
Statewide Reform in NJ

• System of “coordinated autonomy” in which colleges work together voluntarily.
• Academic VPs brought together English and math faculty from across state to decide on same instrument, cut scores and exemption policies.
• In 2008, the 19 Presidents agreed to use the faculty-determined assessment and placement policies.
Statewide Reform in NJ

- Process described as “radical,” “attacked on a number of fronts,” and “extraordinarily difficult.”
- But also as “bottom-up” because faculty-driven.
- “Since the common cut score, we did become unified. We meet and discuss and that’s an important part of collaborating across the state. It has become a good outcome.” (Math faculty)
Assessment & Placement Reform

• Reforms to matriculation process (e.g., review/preparation for placement test, educating students about assessment process)

• Reforms to assessment (e.g., use of multiple measures, diagnostic tools, and non-cognitive assessments)

• How do reforms impact student outcomes?
For more information:

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CCRC is funded in part by: Alfred P. Sloan foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, The Ford Foundation, National Science Foundation (NSF), Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education