Assessment and Placement for Incoming Community College Students: Approaches & Developments in Eight States

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Goals of Assessment and Placement

• Community college students come to college with various levels of academic preparation.

• Assessment and placement process seeks to sort students into appropriate levels of coursework thereby maintaining open-access mission and quality of education.
Is the current process working?

Potential shortcomings due to...

- Disagreement over standards of college readiness
- Students unaware of high-stakes nature of process
- Common placement exams have low predictive validity and may result in misplacement
- Process provides little to no diagnostic information
- Little to no consideration of non-cognitive factors
- Tied to a system of developmental education with its own failings
Research Questions

• What does assessment and placement currently look like, what are recent changes, and what changes are under consideration?
  – What are system-level approaches to assessment and placement across the country?
  – How do colleges work within the current system to make change?
  – What kinds of alternatives to the current practices and policies are colleges implementing?
Methodology & Data

• Purposively selected a diverse group of states and systems:
  – 2 systems: TCSG and USG, WTCS and UW
  – Centralized: CUNY, NC, TX, VA
  – Decentralized: NJ, OR

• Phone interviews with:
  – State/system-level officials (N=34)
  – College Presidents, Academic Officers, Faculty, Test Coordinators, etc. (N=213)
System-level Policy Approaches

• Highly standardized (CUNY, NC, VA, UW)
  – System-wide standards of college readiness

• Standardized, yet flexible (TX, USG, TCSG)
  – System sets minimum standards of college readiness

• Highly flexible (OR, WTCS)
  – Colleges or programs set policies
Working within the Current System

• Institutions and programs mainly move cutoff scores around which can:
  – Contribute to faculty investment in/control of matriculation process
  – Serve as an enrollment management tool
  – Help to maintain academic quality
  – Align standards with academic preparedness of local population

  “Other schools, especially the rural ones, they probably don’t need such high cut scores. But in metropolitan areas, students are vying for seats, so it's good to be able to raise the cut scores that demonstrate students' readiness. And a standard minimum is good because it ensures that the system does not become a diploma mill.”
Drawbacks of Flexibility in Setting Cutoff Scores

- Respondents’ objections to differences in entry-level standards:
  - They are unfair to students.
  - They cause inefficiencies as students navigate college.

  “Students should be able to move. If they move, they should be able to take the next level of developmental education.”

- They contribute to a lack of accountability around standards of academic quality.

  “If every time your budget shifts, you change your [cutoffs] a little bit, I don’t see how you can maintain any level of consistency in your expectations or your outcomes.”
Alternatives to the Status Quo

• Diagnostic assessments in VA and NC
• Self-placement at a college in OR
• Use of a non-cognitive assessment at a WI technical college
• A multiple measures approach at the UW 2-years:

“I think this is a superior model because every student is an individual and determining every student’s ability to be successful is a complicated, individual process. We know that we have a student with an essay sample that says they had a mental illness in HS, and they have low HS grades. We are going to respond to that differently than a student with great grades in HS and the same performance on the essay. We might say the first student might benefit from a slower start and a learning skills course and the next student may do fine in second-semester English composition.”
Conclusions

• Policy approaches span a continuum from highly standardized to highly flexible.

• Respondents enjoy flexibility in moving cutoffs around in their pursuit of a balance between access and quality.

• But, more respondents supported standardized approaches and pointed to drawbacks of flexibility.

• Respondents believe new ways of doing assessment and placement directly address the shortcomings of the current process better.
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