

NextDev Challenge: Assessment and Placement

The following brief is based on an online event hosted by the Education Commission of the States' Getting Past Go remedial education project, which is funded by Lumina Foundation. The [NextDev Challenge](#) solicited a wide range of program ideas that could improve student outcomes in developmental education. This assessment and placement brief is one of four produced as part of the NextDev Challenge. The assessment and placement reform submissions fell into three categories: Bridge Programs, Review and Test Preparation, and Assessment Reform.

Increasingly, state leaders realize that they will not meet their ambitious college-attainment goals unless their strategies help underprepared students successfully progress through the postsecondary education pipeline. Emerging research and better data have revealed, however, that many of these students have not been well served by existing remedial education policies and practices. Currently, more than half of all incoming community college students are placed into remedial classes and nearly four in 10 of those students never complete the courses.¹ Fortunately, a number of effective models and innovations are being adopted to help students avoid unnecessary remedial placement, or give them the supports they need to more quickly advance through developmental education courses.

Reforming Assessment and Placement

Ultimately, developmental education reform will not transform student success without reexamining the tools that institutions use to assess and assign students to courses. Under the current models, too many students are unnecessarily placed into remediation. Data from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) reveal that as many as one-third of students who were placed into remedial courses after taking placement tests could have achieved a grade of B or higher in an actual college-level class. Part of the problem is how the common assessments are used—or misused—to determine course placement. All too often, students do not have a chance to prepare for the assessments and do not understand the high-stakes implications of the results.² While more accurate and diagnostic exams are being developed, institutions need access to multiple tools to help improve assessment and placement of incoming students.



Bridge Programs

Poor alignment between K-12 and college curriculum can create a gap that leaves students in jeopardy of academic failure. Bridge programs aim to close this gap by helping students improve the basic academic and study skills that they will need to be successful in postsecondary education. Research of individual programs suggests that bridge programs also can reduce the need for developmental coursework. In that vein, close collaboration between school districts and higher education institutions can strengthen the effectiveness of bridge programs and other interventions, and improve student outcomes.

The National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) published the findings from a two-year study of developmental summer bridge programs across Texas. The study looked at the several program effects, including how the bridge programs impacted college enrollment and retention rates, momentum through developmental courses and into the first college-level courses, and subsequent college credit accumulation. Results of the study showed that the summer bridge programs did not impact college enrollment or persistence but did accelerate underprepared students' progress into college-level math and English during the first year.³

The bridge programs included in the most promising NextDev submissions all demonstrated a positive impact on student momentum, although some of the results are preliminary:

- ✦ The math and English **bridge course** at Ohio's Cuyahoga Community College enabled nearly 50% of students to place one level higher in math and nearly 60% of students to place one level higher in English. Additionally, more than 80% of students placed one level higher in English through either placement testing or portfolio assessment.
- ✦ The **RISE program** (Readying Incoming Students for Excellence) at New York's Erie Community College helped 71% of students improve course placement over a five-year period.
- ✦ The **Intensive College Math Program** (ICMP) at Texas A&M University reports average gains of approximately 30 points on placement tests; approximately 38% of students place one level higher, 25% place two levels higher, and 15% place three levels higher.

Common Characteristics

The submitted bridge course models all share a common goal: accelerating enrollment into and completion of degree and certificate programs by reducing the number of developmental courses students need. All of the models use an intensive instructional format, with consecutive days of instruction held for a period of up to a few weeks. For example, the RISE program at Erie Community College offers 10-15 hours of instruction over a five-day period, with a placement test on the sixth day. The math and English bridge courses at Cuyahoga Community College are scheduled in two-week sessions. All of the submissions reported increases in pre- and post-test placement scores.

Program Differences

The bridge programs did vary in their approaches for serving students. The program length ranged from one week, such as at Erie Community College, up to five weeks or longer, as at Texas A&M. Erie Community College provides the bridge workshops free of charge to students, whereas Cuyahoga Community College offers one credit for bridge courses. A math bridge course at Columbus State Community College, College Prep Math, employs a modular framework that lets students work at their own pace in a computer lab while still in high school. The Texas A&M course, however, is highly structured into learning blocks that include lecture, group work, lab, and student presentation.

Issues to Consider

Several colleges cited lack of funding and low student interest as the major barriers to developing and scaling bridge programs. Erie Community College noted that the significant cost of instructional salaries can be offset by getting approval for full-time equivalent (FTE) reimbursement. Texas A&M suggested reallocating personnel budget for year-long programs to lower-enrollment summer programs. To address the issue of low enrollment in bridge courses, Cuyahoga Community College requires all students who test into an identified placement range to complete the course.

Review and Test Preparation

Skills review and test preparation programs are alternative, proactive approaches to reduce over-placement of students into remedial courses. The concept is simple: students take courses of short duration to “brush-up” on specific academic or test-taking skills. These types of courses can help students who score near the top end of placement cut-offs avoid remedial classes and more quickly persist into programs of study. The prep courses typically are intensive and short, often allowing students to bypass at least one level of developmental coursework.

The review and test prep courses included in the NextDev top submissions demonstrated positive outcomes—even if preliminary—for students:

- ✦ A mandatory placement test review course at **Cuyahoga Community College** showed a 7.9% decrease in pre-algebra—the first developmental math course placement, a 5.5% increase in beginning algebra, and a 2.3% increase in higher level math course placements. The school also saw a 12.5% decrease in developmental English course placement, and a 12.4% increase in college-level English course placement.
- ✦ The ACCUPLACER test review course at North Carolina’s **Central Piedmont Community College** helped approximately 46% of students to place one course level higher in at least one subject. Average test gains following the review course were 11 points for each math portion, five points on reading Comprehension, and six points on Sentence Skills.
- ✦ A math skills refresher course, Math Prep Experience, at Minnesota’s **Rasmussen College** has helped 80% of students to place at least one course level higher.
- ✦ The Math Refresher Course at the **State College of Florida in Manatee–Sarasota** reports that 80% of students that enrolled in the course went on to successfully complete one or more college-level math courses.

Common Characteristics

The review programs help students to refresh their academic and test-taking skills prior to placement testing. All of the submissions cited the goal of reducing over-placement of students in remedial classes and decreasing time-to-degree. Both the State College of Florida and Rasmussen College have created math refresher courses for students who tested just below the placement cut scores. The colleges found that students in that scoring range performed well in remedial classes and did not ultimately require an entire quarter or semester of developmental coursework. As an alternative, a brief math refresher course can help these students to avoid remedial classes and move directly into credit-bearing courses.

Cuyahoga Community College and Central Piedmont Community College are implementing test prep courses that focus on content review, the implications of a student’s assessment results, and specific testing strategies to improve placement scores.

Program Differences

The refresher courses have various formats, modes of delivery, participation requirements, and can range in duration from a few hours of test prep to a multi-week academic skills review. The Central Piedmont ACCUPLACER review course, for example, is offered online and consists of practice tests and videos. Rasmussen College uses the National Repository of Online Courses (NROC) curriculum to offer a free online course for students who need just a few hours of math prep. The mandatory review course at Cuyahoga Community College includes a two-hour staff-facilitated session and a student self-directed preparation guide. State College of Florida’s math refresher course requires attendance twice a week for five weeks.

Issues to Consider

The barriers to implementing and expanding review courses differ according to the specific components of the program and institutional capacity. For example, some of the colleges offering test prep courses cited the labor-intensive requirements of multiple technological formats. Funding issues and low enrollment also might pose challenges for academic skills prep courses. The State College of Florida partnered with its Corporate and Community Development division to maximize available resources to staff the program. Rasmussen College says a consistent commitment to building student engagement is critical to boosting enrollment and success in these courses.

Central Piedmont Community College recommends making test prep mandatory in order to scale the program efficiently. To that end, North Carolina Community College officials are working with the College Board to develop an online ACCUPLACER test review that will soon be required for all test takers in the state.

Assessment Reform

Assessment reform has the potential to reshape the developmental education landscape. According to research by the CCRC, the current assessment process may unnecessarily hinder student momentum towards degree completion. A more accurate prediction of student performance in college-level classes can be gathered from comprehensive methods, such as high school records, which show student performance over time. Unfortunately, in an era of shrinking budgets, most colleges do not have “the capacity and resources to provide a range of comprehensive assessments or ... to act on the improved information.”⁴

California’s Long Beach City College is piloting a new placement assessment program that uses multiple measures, such as high school grades, and predictive analytics to “more accurately place students at the level at which they are likely to perform well.” The goal is to reduce unneeded remediation and significantly increase students’ degree/certificate attainment and transfer rates. The school reports impressive success: the model has allowed many students to avoid up to seven semesters of remedial coursework that they otherwise would have been required to complete. Approximately 56% of students in the pilot cohort were placed directly into college-level English and 31% into college-level math, compared to 14% and 9% using traditional placement scores. Long Beach still is waiting for final course grades but reports high rates of continued enrollment for the pilot cohort.

Issues to Consider

Long Beach City College faculty members say the main barrier to implementation of predictive analytics is gaining access to high school data. California’s statewide data systems are not sufficiently robust, according to the faculty, which present problems for colleges that accept students from many districts. Long Beach officials say, however, that the potential impact of the predictive model is so significant that even partial implementation and a cursory review of paper transcripts can result in more accurate course placement than the use of standardized placement tests alone.

Conclusion

Emerging empirical research and anecdotal evidence are showing that the commonly used practices and standardized tests for remedial course placement are not improving outcomes for many underprepared students. In response, several colleges are employing a variety of approaches to help students avoid multiple development education courses—or bypass traditional course sequences altogether. Most of these programs provide students with math and English content refreshers or early interventions and test-taking preparation to improve their placement scores. Other programs are looking beyond a single exam score for placement or are using more precise assessment tools to diagnose students’ specific skill deficits. These promising programs are examples of preparation and placement practices that could better target remedial services to those most in need and inform the instructional approaches that will help students move into credit-bearing courses as quickly as possible.

Endnotes

- 1 *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere* (Washington, D.C.:Complete College America, April 2012, p.2), http://www.completecollege.org/state_data (Executive Summary: <http://www.completecollege.org/docs/CCA-Remediation-summary.pdf>), (accessed May 17, 2013).
- 2 Judith Scott-Clayton, *Do High-Stakes Placement Exams Predict College Success?* (CCRC Working Paper No. 41) (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2012), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/high-stakes-predict-success.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2013).
- 3 Elisabeth A. Barnett, et al, *Bridging the Gap: An Impact Study of Eight Developmental Summer Bridge Programs in Texas* (New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research, Teachers College, Columbia University, July 2012), http://www.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/document/22731_NCPR_TexasDSB_FullReport.pdf (accessed May 17, 2013).
- 4 Katherine L. Hughes, Judith Scott-Clayton, *Assessing Developmental Assessment in Community Colleges: A Review of the Literature* (New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research, Teachers College, Columbia University, August 2010), http://www.postsecondaryresearch.org/conference/PDF/NCPR_Panel%20HughesClaytonPaper.pdf (accessed May 17, 2013).

Resources

Using State Policies to Ensure Effective Assessment and Placement in Remedial Education

Mary Fulton, Education Commission of the States, May 2012

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/02/28/10228.pdf>

One-shot Deal? Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement in California's Community Colleges

Andrea Venezia, Kathy Reeves Bracco and Thad Nodine, WestEd, 2010

http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/OneShotDeal.pdf

Where to Begin? The Evolving Role of Placement Exams for Students Starting College

Pamela Burdman, August 2012, Jobs for the Future

http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/ATD_WhereToBegin_050213.pdf

Case Studies of Three Community Colleges: The Policy and Practice of Assessing and Placing Students in Developmental Education Courses

Stephanie Safran and Mary G. Visser, Center for Postsecondary Research, 2010

<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/548/full.pdf>

Predicting Success in College: The Importance of Placement Tests and High School Transcripts

Clive Belfield and Peter M. Crosta, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2012

<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1030>

Please check out the NextDev Challenge website to review the summaries and evidence for the programs highlighted in this brief. Select Read and then search on the program title or institution. <http://gettingpastgo.edthemes.org/>

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Getting Past Go is an initiative of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), funded by Lumina Foundation, that works with state and postsecondary education leaders to increase the success of college students who are placed in remedial education.