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Student Assessment and Placement: Most Colleges Oversimplify the Process

By D. Patrick Saxon & Edward A. Morante

Assessment and placement of entering students is common in higher education. Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, and Davis (2007) reported that 92% of community colleges have entering student assessment and placement programs. However, recent reports have raised questions about the quality of assessment and placement practice (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). In particular, concerns have been raised about the quality of the tests and processes used to place students into courses. Reports about these concerns have caused confusion and misinformation and as a result, some colleges and state systems are considering policies that would eliminate the assessment of entering students. The consequences of these proposed changes would be a return to the 1960's right to fail practice which allowed students the freedom to make their own decisions about which level of college courses to take with little or no regard for their academic skills, knowledge of college requirements, or understanding of their probability of success. However, when college administrators devise and implement comprehensive assessment and placement systems, students will benefit from appropriate entry level course placement. The purposes of this report are to examine the process of assessment and placement, to understand why many colleges have a less than adequate process in place, and to propose a comprehensive model.

Testing instrument concerns. With regard to the commonly used commercial test instruments, there is confusion about their purpose. Placement tests are intended to be used as measures of achievement which provide a snapshot of basic academic skills. Contrary to assertions advanced by some (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011), they are not and should not be expected to predict student success. As Gordon (2006) described, course grades derive from other variables (i.e., student motivation, dedication, attendance, teacher philosophy, instructional practice, et cetera) in addition to student skills. Thus, from a psychometric viewpoint, predictive validity is a moot point. Placement tests should be evaluated on the adequacy of their content, reliability of their scores, and how well they assist in accurately placing students into college courses (Gordon, 2006).

Oversimplifying the process. There is agreement that most colleges employ an overly simplistic assessment and placement process (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). The common process usually begins by the college informing the student that a test is required. Students, however, receive little information about test content, its purpose, or what the scores will be used for – much less what it means to them in terms of their entry point to college. This overly simplistic process often continues with the students receiving a printout of their scores along with a list of recommended courses to take. Depending on the college, advising or counseling may be offered but students often do not use it. As a result, the process commonly depends on a single test score being used to place a student into developmental education or college level courses. The use of additional variables in placement decisions is recommended (Boylan, 2009), but rare (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, & Davis, 2007). This inappropriate use of a single test score for student placement is questionable at best and counterproductive to student success.

Reasons are easily found for not implementing a comprehensive assessment and placement process. Doing so requires commitment, planning, staffing, and resources. Administrators often feel that there is insufficient funding, or that there are too many students and too few staff. Boylan and Saxon (2012) cite leadership as an important component as well. At colleges where administrative leaders are unaware of or uncommitted to a comprehensive model of assessment and placement, it is unlikely that one will exist.

A Comprehensive Model

To address the oversimplification of assessment and placement practice, a comprehensive model can promote a more refined and accurate process. The first step is to acknowledge that the process used for placement is as important, if not more so, than the placement test itself. The application of a simple, convenient tool (i.e., assessment tests) can be a menace if used inappropriately by an ill-trained craftsman. To avoid misuse of tests and their results, advisors and counselors need to be well-trained in understanding the basics of tests and testing. Familiarity with such concepts as reliability and validity is crucial, as is a grasp of the basics of probability, decision-making, and the standard error of measurement. This knowledge is essential for understanding that a test is never perfect and that a true score falls within a statistical range and is subject to a given probability of accuracy. This knowledge also provides evidence to support never using a single score on a single test to make decisions about students' lives.

Assessment and placement must be integral parts of a comprehensive system that assists students in making the transition to college. Students should encounter assessment and placement as part of the first year experience, part of the registration system, and part of student success initiatives.

Figure 1 provides a schematic of a comprehensive and systemic approach to incorporating assessment and placement into the transition from completing the college application to registering for courses. Although some parts can be transposed, all components should be required of entering students and constructed in such a way as to make the process seamless, transparent, efficient, and accepted as the way the college carries out its mission to promote student success.

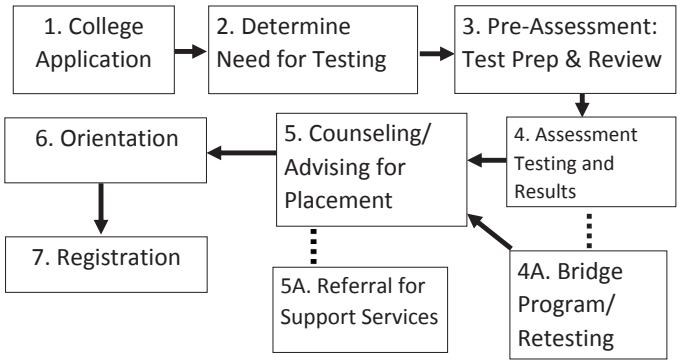

Figure 1. ***A Comprehensive Assessment and Placement Student Flowchart***

Notes: (a) Effective programs *require* that students understand the purpose of assessment, study sample questions, and, if possible, take a review prior to assessment. (b) Placement decisions should consider multiple cognitive and non-cognitive student measures in addition to test scores.

Human resource challenges. As noted, a common barrier to comprehensive assessment and placement is the lack of human resources. One way of addressing the shortage of staff is to broaden the time frame for assessment activities, rather than trying to accomplish everything in a few days before classes begin. Starting the process earlier when students are still in high school is somewhat analogous to dual enrollment. It also employs high school personnel in the process to assist in accommodating large numbers of students without overburdening college staff. The use of trained faculty as knowledgeable advisors, especially vocational faculty, can spread out the workload. When planned carefully, many aspects of placement can be carried out successfully with groups of students, while more individual advising can focus on those students who need more attention and assistance.

How technology can help. Technology can provide invaluable support in a comprehensive assessment and placement model. For example, technology can aid access to high school information and transcripts which provide data such as class rank and/or GPA for use in making placement decisions. Advisors must be trained to access student data quickly and to make sense of it in the broader scheme of working with students to make accurate placement decisions. In addition, computerized placement systems may also offer surveys and other methods of accessing student non-cognitive information within the testing framework to assist in refining the accuracy of the placement process. Finally, the technology used to run the college registration system should also be programmed to ensure that students enroll in their prescribed entering courses. Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2009) showed that failure to enroll in prescribed developmental courses is a major concern. The value of any assessment and placement system is diminished when students can find ways around it.

Establishing and maintaining the effectiveness of a comprehensive assessment and placement model require commitment and planning. Once the elements of a comprehensive model are in place, administrators can focus on the effective performance of the system. The following are recommendations for improving the practice of assessment and placement.

Recommendations for Strengthening Assessment and Placement Practice

1. Colleges, especially community colleges, should work with local high schools to improve the transition to college. This includes such efforts as aligning writing and math skills for college preparation, offering students test practice and test taking opportunities in high school, using the results to provide feedback and to improve skills, providing workshops on college student expectations, and offering career or guidance classes in high school similar to college student success courses.

2. Assessment and placement should be required for consideration of required skills courses in reading, writing, and math. Otherwise, students may be enrolled in courses for which they lack the skills necessary to succeed. The assessment process should determine whether or not a student needs a developmental course and, if so, at what level in each content area.

3. Placement tests should be designed or modified to assist faculty in the diagnosis of skills deficiencies. However, it should be recognized that this may lead to longer tests.

4. Mandatory assessment, placement, counseling/advisement, and orientation should be required for all entering students because, as McClenney stated, "Students don't do optional" (Fain, 2012, p. 1). It seems that the students who need help the most are also the least likely to use it. All support services should be presented by advisors as helpful for student success, not as burdens or obstacles.

5. Entering students should be informed about the assessment test through positive messages aimed at helping them understand what the test is about and how their scores and other data will be used to place them in courses. Opportunities to take practice exams and to prepare through pretesting should be required so that students can brush up on forgotten skills, especially those in mathematics which tend to atrophy quickly.

6. Cut ranges that closely align with the prerequisites of each potential entering course and level should be set. These ranges of scores or *gray areas* should correspond to the course and be closely aligned with the test's standard error of measurement. Ranges are especially important to students falling just below the cut score for a particular course level. In these situations, non-cognitive variables and other student data can be used to decide whether the student can be moved up to the higher level course and/or benefit from academic support services.

7. Summer bridge programs should be offered to students who do not perform well on their first taking of the placement test. These programs should aim to improve skill proficiencies and to decrease the need for developmental courses. However, students should not be allowed to retake a placement test repeatedly until they manage to guess their way to a sufficiently high score.

8. The use of multiple variables in a counseling/advising setting must be universal for placement decisions. These variables may include high school performance (GPA or class rank), years out of high school, courses taken, and grades received in high school – especially in math. The

variables should also include non-cognitive factors such as motivation, maturity, and/or level of responsibility.

9. Evaluation of the placement process needs to be systematic and effective. Too many student course changes made after placement are an indication of problems in the system. Periodically applying a faculty rating system similar to what Gordon (2006) has developed is recommended. In this system, instructors who teach both developmental and first semester college English and math courses are surveyed for their opinions on the accuracy of placement. Other measures such as those listed in the following recommendations will be helpful data points to examine for formative improvement as well.

Recommendations for Formative Evaluation Measures

Several measures in the model should be systematically evaluated to refine and improve the assessment and placement process. The following are recommended data to collect and the data collection points coincide with the process shown in Figure 1:

1. Application: Collect data on number of students completing an application and percentage of students completing an application who (a) are tested, and (b) enroll.

2. Need for testing/assessment: Collect data on the number of students that need testing. Even with mandatory testing, some students are exempted (e.g., already completed reading, English and/or math course at college level with grade of C or higher, transfer students, students with degrees, veterans, et cetera).

3. Test preparation process: Collect data on the percentage of applicants taking a sample test and/or a review program. Include test preparation and review from summer bridge or equivalent programs.

4. Testing and test results: Collect data on (a) the number of students who are assessed with the placement test, and (b) the percentage of those completing an application, not exempted from testing, and who take the placement test, as well as the number and percentage of total tested who place in each level of developmental reading, English, and math.

4A. Bridge program and retesting: Collect data on number and percentage of students referred to bridge programs for retesting, as well as gain scores. Also collect data on number of developmental courses no longer needed after the program.

5. Counseling/advising: Collect data on number and percentage of students tested who receive counseling/advising.

5A. Support services referral: Collect data on number and percentage of students identified through counseling/advising as in need of additional support services (e.g., disability services, mental health counseling, et cetera).

6. Orientation: Collect data on number and percentage of students entering who complete college orientation.

7. Registration: Collect data on number and percentage of students referred who actually enroll in (a) developmental reading, (b) developmental English, and/or (c) developmental math.

Conclusion

Most community colleges offer assessment and placement services. Given what is known about effective student placement processes, careful attention must be taken to address common challenges. The challenges of insufficient variables in making placement decisions and the lack of assessment test practice and preparation opportunities will contribute to less than adequate measures of a student and the fit they may have with particular course options. The failure to offer adequate advising and to enforce placement decisions allows students options for circumventing the system and choosing options that are not in their best interests. Ultimately, assessment, advising, and placement should be tailored as best as possible in order to determine and deliver students to interventions that meet their individual academic and support service needs. This is the best method for assisting students in preparing for college level academics and enabling instructors to maintain course quality standards.

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