



## **MAPPING THE TERRAIN**

Language Testing and Placement for US-Educated Language Minority Students in California's Community Colleges

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## Associated Reports

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Bunch, G.C., Endris, A., & Kibler, A. (Forthcoming, Spring, 2011). *Innovative practices for Generation 1.5: Meeting the needs of US-educated language minority students in California's community colleges*. Will be available at <http://escholarship.org/>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As both the United States and California face a shortage of college-educated workers, increasing attention has turned to the role of community colleges in expanding the number of Americans who earn higher education degrees and certificates. Yet the importance of community colleges goes beyond calculations of the total number of workers that will need to be educated to sustain our economy. Because their open enrollment policies provide potential access to higher education for groups that have long been underprepared by K-12 schools—and underrepresented in higher education-- community colleges also play a potentially vital role in reducing the disparity in educational attainment between racial and ethnic groups (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006). Nationwide, two thirds of all Latino students beginning postsecondary education do so in community colleges (Solórzano et al., 2005), and almost half of all Asian and Pacific Islander students attend community colleges, including many whose low academic achievement is masked by higher aggregated success rates for Asian Americans as a whole (Lew et al., 2005; US Government Accountability Office, 2007). In California, 75% of all first-time Latino, African American, and American Indian college students enroll in community colleges, as do 45% of first-time Asian American college students (Woodlief, Thomas, & Orozco, 2003).

Yet in California, only a small percentage of students who enter community colleges hoping to transfer to a four-year institution or complete a terminal degree or certificate do so, and there are significant disparities in success rates among racial and ethnic groups (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006; Moore & Shulock, 2007, 2010). In a state where over half of all public K-12 schoolchildren are Hispanic, and fewer than one third are White (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010, p. 29), the educational fate of traditionally underserved students represents a mainstream concern. As Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras have pointed out with regard to Latino students, “never before have we been faced with a population group on the verge of becoming the majority in significant portions of the country that is also the lowest performing academically” (2009, p. 18). As educators, policymakers, and researchers focus on preparation, access, and success in community colleges, it is essential to focus on the needs of particularly vulnerable student populations, especially in terms of the institutional barriers they confront in pursuing academic and professional goals, and the impact of policies and instructional practices on their progress.

This report shines light on community college policies and practices impacting students from one particular population that has often been “overlooked and underserved” (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000): students from immigrant and language minority backgrounds who have attended US secondary schools and who enroll in community colleges in hopes of continuing their education. Forty percent of all California K-12 students come from homes where English is not the primary language, and one in four is classified as an English Learner, the state’s designation for students in need of English language support (EdSource, 2008; Rumberger, 2007). Although data on students’ language background is not collected by the state, there is no doubt, given the dominant role of community colleges in providing access to higher education for California’s linguistically and culturally diverse students, that students from language minority backgrounds represent a sizable portion of the state’s community college population.

When they reach postsecondary education, students from language minority backgrounds are sometimes called “Generation 1.5,” because they do not fit the typical linguistic profiles of either native-born English speakers or of other groups of students learning English, including recently arrived immigrants, older adults who have lived in the US for a number of years, and international students planning to return to their countries of origin (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009). However,

due to the tendency for the label “Generation 1.5” to be used to highlight students’ linguistic deficits and downplay their resources and potential, in this report we use the term *US-educated language minority students* (US-LM students), defined as students who were raised in homes where English was not the dominant language, who have attended US high schools, and whose English proficiency at the community college level has been flagged as non-native by faculty, staff, or assessment measures. While US-LM students have been characterized as having relatively fluent speaking skills compared with more recent immigrants and international students, they may have less of a foundation in academic language and literacy skills, both in English and in their first languages, due to inequitable educational opportunities in their countries of origin and in US schools.

Our research explores language-related policies, practices, and instructional options that US-LM students encounter as they matriculate into California community colleges, how this information is communicated to students, and how college personnel perceive of these students and their needs (see also Bunch, 2008, 2009; Bunch & Panayotova, 2008). In this report, we discuss findings from an analysis of matriculation-related information on 25 college websites; interviews with over 50 faculty members, counselors, matriculation personnel, and administrators at 10 subset colleges throughout the state; and site visits at 5 focal colleges. An accompanying report, *What’s in a Test?* (Llosa & Bunch, 2011), describes and analyzes the most widely used community college ESL and English placement tests and discusses implications for their use with US-LM students. A third report, forthcoming, will document innovative testing, placement, and instructional practices that hold promise for meeting the needs of language minority students in community colleges. While many of our findings, conclusions, and recommendations are relevant for students from other minority backgrounds, or even community college students in general, others apply specifically to US-LM students.

The testing and placement process in community colleges represents high stakes, especially for first-generation college students, linguistic and cultural minorities, and academically underprepared students. This process, known as “matriculation” in the California community college system, often results in students’ assignment to ESL or English courses that typically do not earn credits toward a degree, certificate, or transfer to four-year colleges and universities, and that serve as prerequisites to credit-bearing English course(s) required for completing these goals. Such courses are variably known as “precollegiate,” “developmental,” “remedial,” and “basic skills.” Although students in California community colleges can enroll in a variety of content courses while they complete the prerequisites for college-level English, ESL and remedial English courses often demand a large percentage of students’ course time and therefore make concurrent course-taking difficult (Grubb, 1999). Given the financial and personal impact of enrolling in courses that do not grant credit toward a degree or transfer, students facing multiple semesters of basic skills work often abandon their academic aspirations altogether (Bailey, 2009; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

Ideally, the placement process identifies what students are able to do in English and steers them toward the instructional environments that hold the most promise for them to complete their academic goals. At the same time, *misplacement* can have a profound impact on students’ academic pathways. Students with low levels of English language proficiency may be inappropriately placed in regular courses that feature no understanding or support for their language needs, little opportunity for them to improve their English, and a high likelihood of failing the courses. On the other hand, students who might be successful in regular developmental English courses or even college-level English courses, especially if those courses feature some support for linguistically diverse students, may be steered toward ESL classrooms that delay their progress toward required English courses and separate them from the

environments in which they might have greater opportunity to improve their English and academic skills.

In California, a number of regulations govern various aspects of the matriculation process (see California Community College Assessment Association [CCCCAA], 2005; Chancellor's Office, 1998; Shulock and Moore, 2007), including the selection and validation of placement instruments, the use of multiple measures in the assessment process, and how students can challenge the imposition of course prerequisites. However, the enactment and enforcement of the regulations are complicated by decentralized authority in California's community college system, a strong history and culture of local college autonomy, and the state's frequent budgetary crises (EdSource, 2010; Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine, 2010). As we completed our research, funding for California community colleges continued to deteriorate, with direct impact on matriculation policies and services. Due to funding cuts, soon after the completion of our data collection, the state legislature excused community colleges and districts from adhering to many state matriculation regulations. Even before the matriculation regulations were suspended, we found that colleges varied widely in the amount of support provided to students during the matriculation process and in the ways in which the regulations were enacted.

## **Key Findings and Conclusions**

### ***Despite the Linguistic Diversity of the State's Population, US-Educated Language Minority Students are Neither Identified nor Well Understood in California's Community Colleges***

Given the increasing linguistic diversity of the state's population, it is incumbent upon *all* personnel who work with students in California community colleges to understand the linguistic and cultural resources that US-LM students bring with them, the challenges these students face navigating testing and placement, and the implications of various instructional options on their language and literacy development and academic progress. Such understanding is particularly important in light of state and national movements toward common core standards in K-12 schools, and the need to prepare all students for college and career readiness. Yet despite the fact that almost half of California's K-12 students have grown up in homes where languages other than English are dominant, we found that there is little awareness of this population among community college personnel outside of ESL and English instructors. Meanwhile, among faculty and staff members who are aware of the population, there is little agreement regarding students' characteristics and needs. Little research has focused on the US-LM population, due in part to the difficulties inherent in identifying the population. Better means of identifying US-LM students are necessary in order to document their progress through coursework and attainment of degrees, certificates, and transfer. However, identification of these students is not sufficient in the absence of rethinking the instructional options available to them.

Although they have been subjected to an inferior education by California's public K-12 school system, students from language minority backgrounds bring with them a wealth of linguistic, personal, and cultural resources, developed through negotiating different languages and cultures and navigating a range of social and economic challenges associated with their experiences as immigrants and children of immigrants (Valdés, 2003; Yosso, 2005). When recognized and valued, these multilingual and multicultural resources can be built upon by educators and institutions to support US-LM students in pursuing their educational goals and in realizing students' potential civic and economic contribution in an increasingly multilingual and

multicultural society. US-LM students can be viewed as fully functioning bilinguals whose language, like that of all bilinguals, may deviate from that of monolingual speakers of English but who are able to use each of their languages effectively for a variety of purposes. Limitations in what bilinguals can do in *one* of their languages for any single purpose are to be expected as normal features of bilingualism, not as an indication that they lack proficiency in *any* language (see Valdés & Figueroa, 1994).

We found that while some college personnel view US-LM students as developing bilinguals and focus on how they might support US-LM students' linguistic and academic development by capitalizing on their linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources, others emphasized how these students' language deviated from monolingual norms or how they lacked the kinds of backgrounds and experiences common among students from more dominant groups. Given this latter orientation, it is not surprising that some colleges respond by placing US-LM students in multi-semester ESL or remedial English sequences, in an effort to prepare them to enter the academic mainstream.

Yet people learn to use language for particular audiences and purposes by having access to settings in which such language is used, opportunities to interact with others using it, and support in helping to realize how particular features of language are important for particular contexts (Gutiérrez, 1995; Hawkins, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004). It is essential, therefore, to envision support for language development that is integrated with, rather than separated from, opportunities for academic development. While efforts are underway in both ESL and English departments at some colleges to move toward such integration, other colleges maintain remedial approaches that attempt to teach skills such as sentence-writing, paragraph-writing, and even essay-writing in isolation from engagement in authentic academic or professional endeavors. Such decontextualized language and literacy instruction is unlikely to prepare students for the kinds of competencies required to succeed in college-level work.

### ***Colleges Employ Different Strategies to Steer US-LM Students Toward Either ESL or Remedial English Placement Tests and Course Sequences, yet “ESL vs. English?” May Be the Wrong Question to Ask***

For language minority students who have lived in the US for several years, attended US secondary schools, and completed some of their academic work in English, it is not self-evident whether an ESL or regular English course of study is most appropriate. Yet we found that US-LM students often receive little guidance to help them make informed decisions regarding whether to take an ESL or English placement test, a high-stakes decision because at many colleges which test a student elects to take results in being assigned to that particular program, regardless of the score on the test.

ESL and English faculty express different viewpoints regarding whether the US-LM population is generally better served in ESL or remedial English courses. Discussions at the colleges we studied regarding whether US-LM students should be placed into ESL or remedial English courses often focus on *linguistic* or *remedial literacy* pathways, highlighting the discrete language and literacy skills US-LM students are lacking and which program might do a better job of teaching those skills. In contrast, the ESL vs. English decision is rarely discussed in terms of students' *academic* pathways, for example whether ESL or English courses are better serving US-LM students in their progression toward completing precollegiate courses and progressing toward the completion of their academic goals.



Some colleges make a concerted effort to steer US-LM students toward ESL tests and courses. These efforts take many forms: website information that seeks to attract students to ESL courses based on questions about their language use among friends and co-workers; on-line publicity about the benefits of ESL (often without suggesting any liabilities); and the use of branching mechanisms on one commercially available placement test that can result in students' taking an ESL placement test without their prior knowledge or consent. Such practices warrant further investigation, given concerns discussed elsewhere in this report surrounding the appropriateness of some forms of ESL instruction for supporting the academic goals of US-LM students and the fact that ESL course sequences are typically longer than precollegiate English sequences.

Ultimately, however, "ESL vs. English?" might be the wrong question to ask. A more appropriate question might be, "to what extent are the curricula and instruction *within* ESL and remedial English programs conducive to facilitating US-LM students' academic language and literacy development as well as their academic progress toward degrees, certificates, and transfer?" In most colleges we studied, neither ESL nor remedial English courses appeared to be designed with the academic or career goals of US-LM students in mind. Several colleges are working to change this. Two are involved in initiatives designed to learn more about the population. At a third, the ESL department has centered its entire program around the preparation of students for the academic mainstream, an orientation likely to support the goals of many US-LM students.

Colleges' different responses to the linguistic and academic needs of US-LM students are associated with different assumptions about language learners, bilingualism, and the development of academic language and literacy. The different responses are also related to different assumptions about remediation more generally. The orientation of some faculty members can be summed up in the words of one instructor regarding the placement of US-LM students: "when in doubt, always go lower." In contrast, many counselors, and some instructors, worried about the implications of such a stance for students' long-term academic success, given the typical length of ESL and remedial English course sequences, the obstacles students face while moving through those sequences, and the danger of attrition the longer students must enroll in courses that do not bear credit toward certificates, degrees, or transfer (Bailey, 2009; Bailey et al., 2010).

### ***Multiple Measures that Could Prove Useful for Placing and Instructing US-LM Students Are Often Unavailable, Unsolicited, or Underutilized***

One of the fundamental principles of testing in educational settings is that no single test should be used for high stakes decisions (American Education Research Association, 2000; American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999), and the use of multiple measures for placement in community colleges is mandated by California state policy. Particularly for US-LM students, who may perform poorly on placement tests that focus primarily on grammar skills but may be able to fulfill many language functions in English, additional assessment practices are necessary. Ideally, multiple measures and conversations with counselors can inform placement by providing a more complete picture of students' language strengths and needs and of their academic backgrounds and goals. Yet we found wide variation regarding the ways in which multiple measures are (or, in some cases, are not) used in California's community colleges.

The extent to which counselors are allowed to use their “professional judgment” to override placement exam recommendations was criticized at some colleges, especially by faculty members who feel they themselves have little role in the matriculation process and that their own professional judgment is not valued. However, we found that multiple measures at several colleges are only used when students indicate a desire to challenge their placements, meaning that for the vast majority of students no measures are used beyond a single test score. At other colleges, multiple measures consist solely of “points” added to or subtracted from placement test results based on questions added to the test. At most colleges, it is students’ responsibility to provide any additional data they wished to be used for placement purposes. Yet often little or no information is made available to students regarding what can be submitted or how it will be used. Relying on language minority students to investigate and navigate the multiple measures process with minimal information and guidance is likely to deny colleges potentially helpful sources of additional information and limits students’ ability to advocate for themselves during the matriculation process.

At the same time, potential sources of K-12 data that could be useful for making placement decisions about US-LM students, such as students’ K-12 assessment scores and classification as English learners (EL) or Fluent English Proficient (R-FEP), are either unavailable to or unused by community colleges. As a result, students who might be able to use such measures in conjunction with the placement test to demonstrate their ability to use English effectively for academic purposes have little opportunity to do so.

***Access to Comprehensive--and Comprehensible-- Information About Policies, Practices, and Stakes Relevant to Testing, Placement, and Instructional Options Is Essential for US- LM Students, Yet Colleges Vary in the Amount and Quality of Information Made Available***

Given the stakes involved, information about the testing and placement process is essential, especially for US-LM students and others who may be unfamiliar with testing and placement procedures, as well as how to navigate higher education more generally. Yet we found that colleges vary widely in the amount and quality of information provided to students. Some colleges provide clear and useful information regarding such areas as the stakes of the matriculation process, the tests used, and the challenge procedure. In contrast, other colleges provide little or no such information, or they provide information that is either difficult to comprehend or presented in a manner likely to discourage students from using it.

A range of assumptions about US-LM students and other underprepared students is evident in how policies and practices are communicated to students. On one end of the spectrum are policies, practices, and messages that assume students will, in the words of one of our interviewees, “cheat the system” whenever possible. The underlying assumption is often that students cannot be trusted, and that they will consistently attempt to make their way into higher level courses even if unprepared for them. We found that some colleges make it very difficult for students to take placement tests more than once, limit information on websites about the challenge process to what is technically required for them to disclose, and make the challenge process as difficult as possible for students to pursue.

Faculty members, counselors, and staff at several colleges pointed out that US-LM students, along with other students from non-dominant backgrounds, rarely challenge the results of the placement process, and that typically only White and middle-class students who already have large amounts of social and cultural capital do so. A contrasting set of assumptions

presumes that students should be agents in their own education and, when equipped with high-quality information and guidance, can be trusted to make reasonable decisions regarding their academic futures.

### ***Adequate Funding for Matriculation and Counseling is Essential for Colleges to Meet US-LM Students' Needs, Yet Funding Alone is Not Sufficient.***

Clearly, community college policies and practices related to testing and placement are constrained by limited financial resources, which for several years have been insufficient to adequately fund orientation and counseling services (Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment, 2008). Financial concerns influence decisions regarding which placement tests colleges adopt, and such concerns are probably one reason for the fact that a low-cost ESL test not even initially designed for use in academic programs is the most commonly used ESL test statewide (see *What's in a Test*, Llosa & Bunch, 2011; as well as Bunch & Panayotova, 2008). Many faculty members, backed by what is known about best practices in writing assessment (e.g., Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Assessment, 2006), advocate for the use of writing samples in the placement process. Yet these same instructors report that their colleges cannot afford either the expense of computer-scored essay tests or the cost of hiring faculty or others to score writing by hand.

Retesting policies are also impacted by financial concerns: Retesting costs colleges staff time, facilities, and per-test charges by testing companies. Meanwhile, the limited availability of spaces in classes plays a crucial role in placement decisions, as exemplified by one English faculty member we interviewed who gave up the practice of recommending more appropriate placements to students during the first week of class because there were rarely spaces available in any of those classes.

Funding cuts for community colleges, especially for matriculation and counseling services, result in disproportionate negative impact on those already disadvantaged. Those who have greater social and cultural capital will continue to use it, and those with less capital will have fewer means by which to catch up. At the same time, funding alone will not create more equitable and effective policies and practices. Rather, as we argue below, a wide variety of changes must be made related to the education of language minority students in California community colleges.

## **Recommendations in Brief**

### **A. Transparent information about current matriculation policies and instructional options is essential for US-LM students to make informed decisions about their own education.**

Language minority students and others inexperienced with higher education bureaucracies face significant challenges understanding and navigating California's community college testing and placement system. Unless concerted efforts are made to provide all students with high quality, transparent information, along with policies that allow them some agency in their own education, the same patterns of inequality that have placed many students in a marginalized position in the first place will be replicated.

**Recommendation A1. Colleges, with the support of other stakeholders, should communicate transparently and comprehensibly with US-LM students about policies and practices related to testing and placement, and about the stakes involved.**

Colleges should provide clear, accessible, and transparent information to students regarding the purposes and stakes associated with the assessment and placement process, as well as how to navigate each step of the process. Students should have access to information about the format, content, and constructs of the placement tests used at each college, including sample questions and test preparation materials. Students also need explicit information regarding how placement tests will be used, what course sequences students might be placed into as a result of testing, and whether those courses earn credit toward degrees, certificates, or transfer. *All* students (not only those who indicate dissatisfaction with their initial placements) should be made aware of what kind of additional information they can provide to be used as multiple measures, and they should have clear and transparent information about how they can challenge the initial results of the placement process. Colleges should endeavor to make this information as “student-friendly” as possible, avoiding the use of incomprehensible or intimidating bureaucratic language.

Much of this information could be provided to students as early as high school (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). In order to facilitate this process, community college personnel should educate high school students, teachers, counselors, and administrators about community college testing and placement procedures relevant to US-LM students. Such efforts could also be facilitated by streamlining the number of placement tests used statewide.

At community colleges themselves, information about testing and placement should be made accessible to students upon their first encounters with the college, and it is crucial that the state adequately fund counseling services. Until such funding is secured, colleges will have to use as many means as possible to educate students, including larger group orientation sessions, print media, and online outreach through websites and social networking outlets. In order to assist college personnel in learning about other colleges’ successful outreach efforts, the Chancellor’s office, Basic Skills Initiative, and private foundations could support an effort to develop sample “best practices” website templates and intake materials for colleges to use to help students make informed choices. Another potential tool for communicating with large numbers of students at a relatively modest cost could be CCCAssess, the student assessment data warehousing project discussed in the Introduction to the full report. One proposed feature of CCCAssess is a portal for students to access information about placement tests, matriculation policies and practices, and perhaps even data about success rates in various courses by students with similar assessment results as their own.

**Recommendation A2. Colleges should clarify for students, in a balanced way, the difference between ESL and remedial English, the stakes of choosing one over the other, and the potential consequences for future course enrollments.**

As US-LM students decide whether to take ESL or English placement tests, a decision which often determines which sequence they will be placed in, they need to know something about the goals of each program, the course sequences involved, and the potential consequences of being placed in either program. As is the practice at some colleges, students could be encouraged to preview sample questions from the ESL and English placement tests and, preferably with guidance, make a decision as to which test to take. Another possibility might be for colleges to encourage some US-LM students to take both the ESL and English placement

tests and then, again with guidance, to consider the relative merits of the assigned placement in each program. In communicating with students about the ESL and regular English options, it is important for colleges to be forthright about the relative merits and drawbacks of each option for US-LM students. If the stigma associated with ESL by US-LM students is as strong as many of the faculty and counselors we interviewed implied, then it will not be overcome by mere “advertisements” for the benefits of ESL that do not deal frankly with the potential drawbacks for this population.

## **B. Testing, placement, and instructional policies and practices must promote access to and success in *academic* pathways by US-LM students.**

We found that community college staff and faculty at many colleges view assessment and placement as a way to ensure that US-LM students are provided with the “building blocks” (e.g., correct grammar, sentence skills, and paragraph formation) perceived as necessary to prepare students for future academic instruction. Yet while it is certainly appropriate to focus on such areas as part of the instruction provided to US-LM students, such support must be part of larger efforts to foster academic pathways for students, rather than ends in and of themselves. That is, the diagnosis and treatment of discrete language and literacy problems needs to be contextualized in the promotion of academic language and literacy. Such efforts require collecting and analyzing data about students’ progress toward completing their academic goals.

**Recommendation B1. *The Board of Governors, the Chancellor’s Office, and local colleges and districts should promote the use of student success data for high-stakes practices such as those establishing prerequisites for college-level courses.***

The Board of Governors should exercise caution in considering proposed changes aimed at making it easier to establish English and mathematics prerequisites for college-level courses in other content areas. The proposal currently before the Board of Governors to allow faculty to use “content review” alone instead of statistical validation to establish English, ESL, and mathematics prerequisites for courses in other disciplines would raise the stakes of the matriculation process even higher than they are now. Given the problems with the matriculation processes documented in this study, which was conducted even before the suspension of many state matriculation regulations due to the budget crisis, it is difficult to imagine sufficient student safeguards being put in place to mitigate the increased stakes involved with the proposed changes. Underfunding of counseling and matriculation services has resulted in widespread variation in the extent to which these policies are implemented at local colleges. Even before colleges were relieved from some matriculation regulations as a result of the current budget crisis, we found that at most colleges multiple measures were unevenly applied and students had little access to information about the testing and placement process or the stakes involved.

Meanwhile, recent research has questioned the effectiveness of remedial education for preparing students for college-level courses (see Bailey, 2009; Bailey et al., 2010). If statistical validation is no longer required for the establishment of prerequisites, other research will be essential to ensure that there is indeed a relationship between the new, content-review-established prerequisite requirements and students’ ability to succeed in particular courses. Similarly, research will be needed to measure the overall impact of the proposed regulatory changes on students’ success in pursuing their academic goals, especially for language minority students and other minorities underrepresented in higher education.

***Recommendation B2. Colleges should investigate and document the impact of retesting and the challenge process on students' academic success.***

A wide range of current practices at some colleges discourages retesting (e.g., by requiring long waiting periods; requiring administrative approval; using lowest instead of highest scores; and, in apparent contradiction with state policy, charging fees). Colleges should investigate the impact of such policies on students' ability to progress toward their academic goals. Colleges' own institutional data could be used for this purpose. For example, researchers at one college we visited found that, upon taking the mathematics placement test a second time, almost three-quarters of students placed into a higher-level course, and these students completed and passed the resulting course at higher rates than other students in the same course. The college is currently studying the results of English retesting on student success.

***Recommendation B3. Colleges, with support of other stakeholders, should move beyond the "ESL vs. English" debate to focus on how a wide variety of instructional environments, within and beyond ESL and English courses, can be improved to foster the development of students' academic language and literacy and their preparation for college-level coursework.***

Colleges, with the support of the Chancellor's office, private foundations, and research enterprises, need to develop, implement, and document the results of efforts in both ESL and English programs, as well as in other areas, to design instructional opportunities that offer what Valdés (2004) has called "support without marginalization." Such approaches (whether in ESL courses, English courses, courses designed specifically for US-LM students, or other approaches such as learning communities that give students access to college-level coursework) can integrate language development and academic preparation. These approaches focus on the development of academic language and literacy, and they create opportunities for language minority students to use such language and literacy in more authentic settings. Because it is impossible to measure the potential success of US-LM students in courses to which they have never had access, flexibility in placement practices will be required in order for the outcomes of different instructional options for US-LM students to be studied.

***Recommendation B4. Colleges, with support from the Chancellor's office and outside foundations and researchers, should develop, implement, and research the efficacy of instructional programs that seek to accelerate US-LM students' progress toward college-level coursework.***

At most of the colleges in our sample, many US-LM students face multiple course sequences in either ESL or remedial English before reaching college-level courses. Many faculty members expressed faith in such sequences to remediate students appropriately, yet recent reviews of the research show that remedial coursework has produced "mixed results at best" for the general student population (Bailey, 2009, p. 3; see also Bailey et al., 2010). It is likely that US-LM students are in particular need of courses that provide the integration of language and content in academically rigorous curricula. At the minimum, both ESL and developmental English courses must include a focus on academic language and literacy *throughout* course sequences, even at the earliest levels, instead of restricting courses to basic grammar, sentence structure, and paragraph development. Another possibility is to accelerate students' progress by placing more students who score on the borderline between precollegiate and college-level courses directly into college-level courses, and to provide them additional support within or alongside those courses (see Bailey, 2009). Other options include the creation of shorter and more challenging pre-collegiate sequences, as well as learning communities in which students take developmental coursework while also enrolled in credit-bearing, college-level coursework.

The efficacy of all such initiatives must be researched, both for students in general and US-LM students in particular.

**C. Throughout the community college system, a better understanding is needed of the backgrounds, characteristics, needs, and academic progress of US-LM students.**

Given that almost half of California's public school students have grown up in families where English is not the dominant language, US-LM students do not represent a fringe group, of interest only to those who specialize in ESL or second-language education. Instead, language minority students must be considered in discussions surrounding policy and practice, both at the state level and in individual colleges. One English instructor we interviewed put it this way: "These students are kind of invisible to our campus. And yet, they're most of our students. How can this be the majority population and be invisible?" This statement echoes calls by some researchers to consider language minority students, along with other students from non-dominant and marginalized backgrounds, as the "new mainstream" (Enright, in press).

***Recommendation C1. State policy makers, the Chancellor's office, colleges and districts, and K-12 officials should work together to strengthen the availability and use of multiple measures, including those from K-12, both for placing US-LM students and for supporting them once placed.***

Given the relatively narrow range of language proficiency measured by ESL and English placement tests (see *What's in a Test?*, Llosa & Bunch, 2011), additional information is necessary, including data from the K-12 system, in order to appropriately place and support US-LM students. Most US-LM students in California community colleges have done at least some of their K-12 schooling in California public schools, which uses a single assessment system, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), along with a statewide system for classifying students as English learners and reclassifying them as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). This system uses the CELDT, the mainstream California Standards Test (CST), and teacher input. Yet we found that colleges rarely use K-12 data in the placement process, and we found no examples of colleges using students' K-12 language proficiency levels, English learner classification, or CELDT scores for this purpose.

One promising avenue that does not require access to additional data or extensive training of community college personnel is the Early Assessment Program (EAP), in which augmented 11<sup>th</sup> Grade standards tests can be used to exempt students who are prepared for college-level coursework from the testing and placement process (Kirst, 2010; Perry, Bahr, Rosin, & Woodward, 2010, p. 90). This initiative, used by the California State University system and currently being piloted by several colleges, could save institutions the expense of testing and placing already-prepared students. It could also save students time and reduce the likelihood of their being misplaced into unneeded remedial courses.

***Recommendation C2. The Chancellor's office, institutional researchers in colleges and districts, and researchers outside the community college system should conduct more extensive research on US-LM students' linguistic and academic needs, and on their progress through course sequences.***

Beyond additional sources of information to be used for placement purposes, more research is needed, both by colleges and outside research organizations, on the characteristics,

needs, and progress of US-LM students. If such information is not currently available, community colleges and K-12 systems need to work together to make it accessible. Additionally, data documenting students' progress from high school into, through, and beyond community college should be used. Efforts by consortia such as CalPASS to facilitate the sharing of relevant data should be encouraged. Other efforts, such as unified data systems (Vernez, Krop, Vuollo, & Hansen, 2008), should also be supported to improve the quality and accessibility of data that can be used to measure student progress, both overall and through different course sequences.

***Recommendation C3. College faculty, counselors, staff, and researchers inside and outside the community college system should solicit students' input to inform policy and practice.***

A limitation of much research on community college policy and practice, including our own, is the lack of student voices.<sup>1</sup> Students should be included in discussions and decision making about the assessment and placement process and the use of pre-requisites and other gate-keeping mechanisms. Students should also be included in campus discussions related to curriculum and program design. Speaking directly with students, whether it be as part of informal inquiries by faculty groups or more formal research, is important to help unpack the causes of the “ESL stigma” described to us by faculty and staff. Although the origins of the stigma may be traced to US-LM students' K-12 experiences, there may also be contributing factors at community colleges themselves. Efforts to make ESL more attractive to US-LM students, such as adopting a name other than ESL, should be accompanied by more substantive changes that draw on students' perceptions and address their concerns.

***Recommendation C4. All responsible parties (the Chancellor's office, Basic Skills Initiative, local colleges and districts, and partners such as private foundations and research organizations) must work together to create opportunities for educating community college faculty, counselors, staff, and administrators about the characteristics, strengths, and needs of US- LM students, the nature of bilingualism, and how to create optimal conditions for students' academic and language development.***

Given the wide range of conceptions—and misconceptions—held by community college personnel about bilingualism and US-LM students, efforts are needed to better inform faculty, staff, and counselors about these students and about the high stakes of language testing for them. These efforts need to include ESL, basic skills, and college-level English faculty; mainstream disciplinary faculty; career and technical education faculty; counselors; matriculation staff; and administrators. Matriculation and assessment staff members need to know more about the US-LM population in general. Community college faculty and staff should be specifically educated about K-12 curricula, tests, language proficiency designations, and the reclassification process for language minority students. In addition, faculty should explore ways to integrate academic language and content for US-LM students, both in precollegiate courses and college-level courses. Finally, institutional researchers and others should study the impact of different courses and course sequences on the academic progress of language minority students.

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is recent interviews conducted by Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine (2010) documenting the perspectives of students on navigating the matriculation process at a number of California community colleges.



**D. All stakeholders involved in the education of US-LM students should simultaneously (a) continue to advocate for adequate state funding for community colleges and (b) explore costs and benefits of potential money-saving testing, placement, and instructional practices and policies.**

Given the crucial role that community colleges play in the education of the state's most vulnerable students, as well as their role in educating demographic groups that collectively represent the state's majority population, adequate funding for community colleges is essential and provides long-term benefits to the state. For example, services such as counseling are expensive in the short term but represent a long-term investment for students, colleges, and, ultimately, the public. Therefore, efforts must continue to advocate for adequate funding. At the same time, colleges, districts, and the system as a whole must explore reforms that could simultaneously strengthen student success and save costs, either in the short term or long term. Although an economic cost-benefit analysis of these proposals was beyond the scope of this study, potential cost savings associated with several of the recommendations mentioned earlier are worth exploring:

- The Early Assessment Program, in which high school students demonstrate readiness for college-level English and mathematics courses, could save colleges the cost of testing and placing these students once they get to community college.
- The central warehouse for assessment data (CCCAssess) could save colleges the costs of providing their own placement tests; result in overall efficiencies on the part of the system through negotiating a systemwide contract with vendors; and provide college researchers, faculty, and students with a low-cost source of data.
- Directed self-placement could be less expensive than using commercially developed placement tests. According to matriculation officials at the one college in our sample that used self-placement for ESL, the practice has proven to be as valid as the test formerly used by the college.
- Given the enormous costs of remedial education, both for community colleges and students themselves (Bailey, 2009), it is likely that acceleration strategies could improve student success and reduce costs.

Similar efforts to simultaneously strengthen student success and save financial resources can be undertaken at the local college level as well. At one of the focal colleges in our study, staff and faculty members used student data to explore how they could better serve students and reduce costs. Working with their institutional researcher, they discovered that students who were enrolled only in ESL courses during any given semester had lower retention rates than other students. In response, the college has recently consolidated the ESL curriculum into fewer courses and units per course and counseled students to enroll in non-ESL courses while completing the ESL sequence. Although data are not yet available regarding student outcomes, the change exemplifies an effort to simultaneously reduce costs and improve student success.

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