



California Acceleration Project

Supporting California's 112 Community Colleges
To Redesign their English and Math Curricula
And Increase Student Completion

<http://3csn.org/developmental-sequences>

Response to Draft Recommendations by the Student Success Task Force November 8, 2011

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Executive Summary

The Student Success Task Force's emphasis on improving outcomes for community college students is important and timely. As faculty leaders of a statewide initiative to increase student completion, we support this effort.

Our focus here is to consider the extent to which the Task Force recommendations do (and do not) promise to improve the outcomes of basic skills students, particularly those in transfer pathways. We examine the recommendations in terms of our focus in the California Acceleration Project:

How can we reduce the high student attrition in basic skills sequences and help more students complete transfer-level gatekeeper courses in English and Math?¹

The attached analysis suggests several revisions to make the recommendations align more closely with the above goals.



The California Acceleration Project is an initiative of the California Community Colleges' Success Network, with support from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, LearningWorks, and the Community College Research Center's "Scaling Innovation" study

¹ This analysis is targeted to our work accelerating course sequences in English and Math, with a focus on students preparing for transfer; however, we support a broad approach to score cards, with progression metrics tailored to different pathways. For career-technical students, certificate completion is often a more meaningful outcome than gatekeeper English/Math completion. We support the efforts of the EDGE campaign and other groups to make CTE/workforce development needs more explicit in the recommendations.

Large-scale nationwide studies provide unequivocal evidence that our current system of multi-level basic skills sequences is not working. Instead of helping students develop the skills to progress through college level coursework, these sequences are the mechanisms through which too many students are weeded out of community colleges.

The California Acceleration Project stresses that addressing this problem requires colleges to reduce sequence length and eliminate the “exit points” where basic skills students are lost. We introduce colleges to a range of curricular models for doing this:

- *Mainstreaming Students into College-Level Courses*
- *Open-Access One-Semester Integrated Reading and Writing Courses*
- *Open-Access One-Semester Pre-Statistics Courses*
- *Contextualized Instruction Embedded in Career-Technical Programs*
- *Mechanisms for Bypassing Remedial Levels*
- *Compression Models that Combine Levels of Existing Sequence*

We emphasize that instead of front-loading instruction in de-contextualized sub-skills (e.g. multiplying fractions, addressing discrete grammatical errors), accelerated curricula should engage students in the same kinds of content, thinking, and skills they will see in the transferable course, with a supportive classroom environment and “just-in-time remediation” to meet course challenges.

Nationwide, emerging research into accelerated models shows significantly better outcomes for basic skills students. These models are receiving attention from the Gates, Lumina, and Hewlett foundations; research organizations CCRC and MDRC; and multi-state reform efforts Complete College America, the Education Commission of the States, and the Developmental Education Initiative. Inside California, the movement to build accelerated pathways gained tremendous momentum last year. More than 80 of the state’s 112 community colleges have participated in trainings offered through 3CSN to date. Approximately 100 sections of new accelerated English and Math courses will be offered this year at the 17 colleges participating in our 2011 Community of Practice, and many more colleges are developing pilots for 2012-13.

Some elements of the Student Success Task Force recommendations seem to support the larger movement to accelerate students’ progress to and through gatekeeper courses – especially recommendation 8.3, which provides a financial incentive for colleges to reduce the length of students’ remedial pathways, and the recommendations (7.2, 7.3) to implement a “score card” for key momentum points and progress outcomes.

Other recommendations, however, may have the unintended consequence of deterring this movement. We are particularly concerned about the emphasis on standardized placement testing (recommendation 2.1), given recent research into the weak predictive value of these instruments and the promise of reforms that de-emphasize placement testing. We are also concerned about the omission of reference to accelerated models of Math and English (recommendation 5.1). Taken together, these recommendations may lead the system to inadvertently rule out some of the most transformational, high-leverage approaches to increasing student completion.

We hope that the Task Force will consider revising its recommendations to more directly support the movement to redesign curricula and increase gatekeeper completion by basic skills students.



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Response to Draft Recommendations by the Student Success Task Force Detailed Analysis and Suggested Revisions

- 1) *Community Colleges will support the development of alternatives to traditional basic skills curriculum and incentivize colleges to take to scale model programs for delivering basic skills instruction. (Recommendation 5.1)*

This recommendation highlights a number of specific strategies colleges might consider, such as learning communities, supplemental instruction, and team teaching. While such approaches have value, they do nothing to address the length of basic skills sequences, which has been shown to be the key determinant of gatekeeper completion rates.²

The draft recommendations are strangely silent on the idea of “accelerated” curricula – models of basic skills instruction that shorten course sequences and reduce the exit points where students are lost. This omission that is striking given the attention acceleration has received from national philanthropic, research, and reform organizations.

There are many successful models for increasing basic skills students’ completion of transfer-level gatekeeper courses:

- The Accelerated Learning Project at the Community College of Baltimore County mainstreams upper-level developmental students directly into college English, with an additional support course provided by the same instructor. Analysis by the Community College Research Center shows that student completion of College English has increased significantly, and the program has been scaled up to become the primary developmental English pathway at the college.³
- At Chabot College and Las Positas College, more than 75% of developmental students now enroll in just *one* basic skills course below college English, and student completion of the

² Hern, K., with Snell, M. (June/July 2010). “Exponential Attrition and the Promise of Acceleration in Developmental English and Math.” *Perspectives*. Berkeley, CA: RP Group. <http://www.rpgroup.org/resources> under “Acceleration.”

³ Jenkins, D. et al (Sept. 2010). A Model for Accelerating Academic Success of Community College Remedial English Students: Is the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) Effective and Affordable? (CCRC Working Paper No. 21). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=811>

transfer-level course is significantly higher than at colleges with longer sequences. The California Acceleration Project is supporting colleges across the state to pilot similar courses.

- At Los Medanos College, students with any placement score can enroll in a 6-unit one-semester pre-Statistics course, instead of the 15-unit, four-semester traditional developmental sequence. In the first two cohorts (84 students), completion of transfer-level math was 3 to 6 times higher than among students with comparable placement scores in the traditional sequence. Seven California colleges are working with us to pilot similar models this year.
- Chaffey College provides a 3-week review course for students who place into arithmetic (4 levels below), followed by retesting; in a study of 400 students, 80% of those completing the review placed into intermediate algebra and were eligible to enroll in a late-start class to finish “four levels” in one semester.

While research into these models is ongoing, the evidence is clear about the urgency of redesigning long remedial sequences. According to Nikki Edgecombe of CCRC, “The evidence on acceleration, while limited, is promising...and the growing interest in this strategy should encourage practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to think boldly about how to improve the current course delivery system in community colleges. To reach the ambitious credential completion goals set by the Obama administration and the philanthropic community, institutions will need to radically rethink current policy and practice, challenge institutional norms, and be willing to reallocate resources to unconventional interventions that are shown to enhance academic achievement.”⁴

Suggested Revisions to Recommendation 5.1:

- The Task Force recommendations should more explicitly guide colleges to focus not only on interventions to increase success rates in courses within the existing sequence, but on increasing overall completion of gatekeeper courses in English and Math. They should also specify that meaningful gains in this area require redesigning curricula, shortening pipelines, and eliminating the exit points where students are currently being lost.
- The interventions listed in this section of the Task Force report should be revised to include the following approaches: “mainstreaming developmental students into college-level courses, open-access one-semester courses that integrate reading and writing, accelerated pre-Statistics courses, and accelerated review and retesting mechanisms.”
- The recommendations should also explicitly stress that revised curricula must maintain access and equity – e.g. not simply cutting low-level English and Math courses where Black and Latino students are disproportionately placed, but providing low-scoring students access to shorter, redesigned pathways. We need to focus on innovations that cut levels, not students.

⁴ Edgecombe, N. (May 2011). Accelerating the Achievement of Students Referred to Developmental Education. CCRC Brief #55. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College. Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=920>

2) *Establish an alternative funding model to encourage innovation and flexibility in the delivery of basic skills instruction. (Recommendation 8.3)*

This recommendation holds the most promise for fighting the high attrition that is structurally guaranteed in long remedial sequences. We believe the recommendation could be a powerful lever to motivate colleges to implement the kind of alternative models described above.

At the same time, we have concerns about the incentive's reliance on standardized placement instruments. There is compelling evidence that reliance on placement scores does not increase student completion, and further, that programs *not* relying on placement scores *have* seen increased completion rates.⁵ We are concerned that tying this incentive to placement tests may further rigidify the system of tracking students into 2, 3, 4 or more remedial courses, thereby working against the very goal of the recommendation (see further discussion under Recommendation 2.1).

Suggested Revisions to Recommendation 8.3:

We recommend keeping the incentive structure in place. However, the unintended consequences of tying this incentive to placement scores need to be addressed.

- Rather than linking the incentives to placement scores, the task force should consider tying funding to other incentives, such as increased student completion of gatekeeper courses. If the incentive were changed in this way, it would need to include safeguards recognizing socioeconomic differences between colleges, so that wealthier schools are not rewarded at the expense of colleges serving economically disadvantaged populations. Colleges might, for example, be measured against their own past performance and rewarded for gains in gatekeeper completion rates. This change would also need to be combined with an additional mechanism rewarding colleges for completion of credentials that don't include gatekeeper English/Math courses, e.g. career-technical certificates.
- If the bulk of incentives remain linked to placement scores, a separate innovation pool should be set aside to allow for waivers and exceptions, such as colleges that use informed self-placement rather than standardized tests, a practice currently in place for

⁵ See for example: Hughes, K. L. & Scott-Clayton, J. (August 2010). "Assessing Developmental Assessment in Community Colleges: A Review of the Literature." CCRC Working Paper No. 19. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=804>;

Jenkins, D. et al. (Nov. 2009). Promoting Gatekeeper Course Success Among Community College Students Needing Remediation: Findings and Recommendations from a Virginia Study (Summary Report). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=714>

Phillips, B. (Sept. 18, 2011). "How to Break the Cycle of Remedial College Classes." Good Education. www.good.is/post/how-to-break-the-cycle-of-remedial-college-classes/

developmental and transfer English at Moorpark College, developmental and transfer Math at Diablo Valley College, and developmental English at Chabot College.

- Additionally, if incentives remain tied to placement scores as currently proposed, a formal review should be conducted within three years of implementation to examine the impact of this system. We will know that the incentive structure is not working if gatekeeper completion rates remain stagnant or decline, if disproportionate numbers of Black and Latino students continue to be placed into the lowest levels of remediation, if equity gaps remain stagnant or widen, and if curricular sequences across the state are not shortened.

- 3) *In collaboration with the CCC Chancellor's Office, districts and colleges will identify specific goals for student success and report their progress towards meeting these goals in a public and transparent manner...Implement a student success score card. (Rec. 7.2, 7.3)*

These recommendations focus colleges' attention on tracking student progress, increasing the number of students who complete key momentum points, and closing equity gaps. This has been central to the work of 3CSN, and we are pleased to see this emphasis in the Task Force recommendations.

Suggested Revisions to Recommendation 7.3:

- We believe Recommendation 7.3 should specify that colleges track "student completion of transfer-level gatekeeper courses in English and Math" instead of the current language "completion of basic skills sequences." Completion of the gatekeeper course is the more important intermediate momentum point for transfer pathway students, and a growing number of colleges are improving this outcome by mainstreaming students directly into gatekeeper courses and bypassing basic skills sequences entirely. The score card should not presume the model of "basic skills sequences" as the solution for addressing basic skills needs.

- 4) *Community colleges will develop and implement a common centralized assessment for English reading and writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) that can provide diagnostic information to inform curriculum development and student placement and that, over time, will be aligned with the K-12 Common Core State Standards and assessments. (Recommendation 2.1)*

On its face, the recommendation seems logical and straightforward. Having a shared assessment would appear to promote transparency and efficiency. However, given that so much research has pointed to the ineffectiveness of placement tests, we are very concerned about a policy that would give additional weight to these exams. Our basic skills system is in grave need of redesign, and we worry about any recommendation that will interfere with potentially transformational change.

At most colleges nationwide, placement score = destiny. The lower a student's initial placement, the less likely that student is to complete college English or Math and become eligible for longer-term credentials. And yet, this system hinges upon standardized placement tests that have proven to be deeply flawed⁶:

- Students typically take placement tests without preparation or awareness of the stakes.⁷
- The tests measure only a set of de-contextualized sub-skills and fail to capture the broader cognitive and affective dimensions of "college readiness."⁸
- There are gross misalignments between what is tested and what is required for success in a given educational pathway (e.g. testing students' recall of algebraic procedures they won't need if their chosen program requires Statistics, not Calculus)
- The tests lead us to under-estimate the capacity of low-scoring students, the folly of which is highlighted by their performance in challenging accelerated classrooms.⁹
- In a Virginia study, students who ignored placement recommendations and proceeded directly into a college-level gatekeeper course passed the course at comparable rates to students who had taken the recommended developmental coursework. Importantly, because fewer students were lost in the developmental pipeline, overall gatekeeper completion rates were significantly higher among this group.¹⁰
- In the Grossmont-Cuyamaca district, students who had passed high school courses aligned with the college curriculum were allowed to enroll in the college English course regardless of their placement score. According to Brad Phillips, "Like many of their fellow freshmen nationally, a whopping 95 percent of high school graduates from West Hills [High School] who received As and Bs in their senior English courses did not 'pass' the placement test. Yet when allowed to enroll in college-level courses instead of remedial

⁶ Hughes, K. L. & Scott-Clayton, J. (August 2010). "Assessing Developmental Assessment in Community Colleges: A Review of the Literature." CCRC Working Paper No. 19. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=804>

⁷ Venezia, A., Bracco, K. R., & Nodine, T. (2010). One-shot deal? Students' perceptions of assessment and course placement in California's community colleges. San Francisco: WestEd. <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/1051>

⁸ Conley, D. (2010). "Replacing Remediation with Readiness." An NCPR Working Paper. www.postsecondaryresearch.org.

⁹ Hern, K., with Snell, M. (June/July 2010). "Exponential Attrition and the Promise of Acceleration in Developmental English and Math." *Perspectives*. Berkeley, CA: RP Group. <http://www.rpgroup.org/resources> under "Acceleration."

¹⁰ Jenkins, D. et al. (Nov. 2009). Promoting Gatekeeper Course Success Among Community College Students Needing Remediation: Findings and Recommendations from a Virginia Study (Summary Report). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=714>

classes, 86 percent successfully completed college-level English, lost no time in their progress, and stayed on course toward earning a degree.”¹¹

Overall, placement tests are used to conclude – in advance, and with flawed information – that certain students are incapable of meeting higher-level academic challenges. And on the basis of these tests, colleges deny students access to courses where they might *demonstrate* their capacity. Current placement systems also rely on the assumption that learning is best served by separating students into homogeneous skill-groupings, an assumption challenged by heterogeneous accelerated classrooms.

We are particularly concerned that in order to be used as a financial incentive in 8.3, this recommendation would have to assign set scoring ranges to the CB 21 categories “one level below,” “two levels below,” “three levels below.” We worry that this will make it harder to persuade faculty that students classified as two or three levels below transfer can actually perform in a challenging accelerated class one level below, or even in a transfer-level class that includes built-in support. We are also concerned that colleges will interpret this policy as requiring student *placement* in these levels and that the placement system will become further entrenched, rather than opened up to innovative curricular models.

Finally, we are not aware of any tests in existence that can simultaneously place students *and* diagnose their areas for improvement. As a recent analysis of Florida’s new readiness test explained, that state community college system discovered that their placement instrument could *not* also be used for diagnostic purposes.¹² With no track record to speak of, we are concerned that diagnostic tests – yet to be developed – will be just as flawed as our existing instruments. What, exactly, will be “diagnosed”? The same kinds of de-contextualized, non-predictive sub-skills that our current tests measure? And what will colleges *do* with the diagnostic information they receive? It seems likely that the tail will wag the dog, with standardized tests driving us toward basic skills curricula that are even more focused on “drill and kill” grammatical workbooks or algebraic procedures, rather than engaging in the kinds of college-level tasks accelerated classes often emphasize.

Suggested Revisions to Recommendation 2.1

- We recommend that the state hold off on implementing a uniform assessment test and uniform cut scores for the time being. The stakes of this issue are simply too high, and the evidence too weak, to proceed with such a large-scale statewide policy.
- Instead, work should begin on developing the new diagnostic tests, piloting them at a sample of colleges, and evaluating their effectiveness. As this work proceeds, careful

¹¹ Phillips, B. (Sept. 18, 2011). “How to Break the Cycle of Remedial College Classes.” [Good Education](http://www.good.is/post/how-to-break-the-cycle-of-remedial-college-classes/). www.good.is/post/how-to-break-the-cycle-of-remedial-college-classes/

¹² Burdman, P. (Sept. 2011). Testing Ground: How Florida Schools and Colleges Are Using a New Assessment to Increase College Readiness. Boston: Jobs for the Future. <http://www.jff.org/publications/education/testing-ground-how-florida-schools-and-c/1307>

consideration should be given to guard against the kind of unintended consequences and testing limitations described above. In particular, the state needs to ensure that any changes to the placement system are accompanied by significant curricular reform. If we improve the test, but continue to track students into 2, 3, 4 semesters of remediation, we will see few if any gains in student completion.

5. Resource-Saving Implications of Accelerated Pathways

At present, most colleges do not have enough capacity in their basic skills courses to support recommendation 3.4 (requiring students to begin basic skills in first year). Without additional resources, this recommendation would necessitate reductions in other areas, potentially undermining colleges' ability to offer the classes required for student completion of their educational programs (Recommendations in Chapter 5).

However, wider implementation of accelerated models of basic skills would help colleges balance course offerings in basic skills, CTE, and transfer programs. If remedial pathways were shortened and redesigned, existing financial and physical resources could be reallocated to support other areas. For example, if a college with three levels of reading and three levels of writing below college English were to move toward a model of an integrated, open-access course one level below transfer (in place for more than a decade at Chabot College and currently being piloted at several colleges statewide), it would significantly reduce the resources required to move a student toward college English. Instead of providing funding and rooms for 6 sequential basic skills classes, the college would focus its resources on 1 pre-collegiate class. If the experience of Chabot bears out elsewhere, this will have the happy consequence of increasing demand for college English, as more basic skills students actually make it there. It would also free up resources for enrollment planning in other parts of student education plans.

Suggested Revisions to Recommendations

- We suggest that this issue be made more explicit in chapters 3, 5, and other parts of the document that discuss ways to reallocate existing resources.



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