

Using a K-12 Assessment for College Placement¹

By Michael W. Kirst

Across the nation, high percentages of high school graduates are entering college, but increasingly they need remediation to succeed there. As a result, colleges are expending a great deal of resources on remediation instead of college-level education, while large numbers of students never get past the first year of college.

In the California State University system, with 408,000 students on 23 campuses, remediation rates have risen over the past decades, along with concerns among the public and state policymakers about the high number of poorly prepared students entering CSU from California public high schools. High remediation rates raise questions concerning the quality of public schools and about the K-12 content standards and accompanying state tests developed by the California State Board of Education. Furthermore, the high level of CSU remediation is expensive. About 25,000 out of 40,000 first-time CSU students need some form of remediation. The university must absorb the cost of providing classes not offered for college credit. Parents and students bear additional expenses because remedial courses do not count toward graduation; consequently, students take longer to finish degrees.

In the mid 1990s, this problem prompted the CSU Board of Trustees to establish the Trustees' Subcommittee on Remedial Education to explore solutions. As a result, the state has modified the exam administered to all eleventh graders to better align it with what it takes to enter CSU prepared to succeed in college. CSU is the first statewide system to adopt a K-12 state assessment as its own placement test for first-year students. This is an important breakthrough in K-16 assessment policy, and it promises to provide clearer signals to high school students who have been uninformed about the discrepancy in standards between their high school grades, tests, and CSU placement.

This policy can also help reorient the high school senior year to an intensive academic experience to attain placement at the expected credit (e.g. non-remedial) level. It is a rare collaboration by secondary and postsecondary education to help solve a mutual problem that neither education level can attain on its own.

Evolution of the Problem

By state policy, CSU accepts the top third of California high school graduates, most of whom have a 3.0 average in the same number of academic courses as required for entering the system.² Except for students with high SAT scores, though, all incoming CSU students must take placement tests in English and entry-level mathematics before they can enroll in any classes their first semester/quarter. Students who don't meet the cut-off scores on either test must take and pass remedial courses before enrolling in the typical course sequence toward the General Education degree. If test scores are particularly low, a student might need first to pass a lower-level remedial course, then to advance to a higher-level remediation course.

The CSU central office determines the cut-off scores, but each institution determines the specific process of remediation and development (e.g., the specific courses, the number of levels of remediation/development). At Sacramento State, for example, placement tests serve as gatekeepers to Math 1 and English 1A, which begin the typical course sequence in those subjects. Students take the math test only once: it is not re-administered after completing remedial coursework as a check for mathematics understanding.

Currently, more than half of entering freshmen taking the CSU placement test require remediation in English or math before entering college-level coursework (47 percent fail English, 37 percent math). It was numbers like these that led the CSU Board of Trustees to establish the Trustees' Subcommittee on Remedial Education. In January 1995, a study committee presented the trustees with background information on remediation in the CSU, along with several preliminary recommendations.

Initially, the trustees proposed that by Fall 2001 all regularly admitted freshmen attain proficiency in English and math. However, after a series of public hearings the CSU trustees established

benchmarks for a 12-year period for reducing remediation. The first of these targets was that by 2001 the need for remediation for regularly admitted freshmen would decline by 10 percentage points from 1996 levels, and then be reduced by one-half of the 1996 remediation rate by 2004. By the trustees' final target date of 2007, only 10 percent of the regularly admitted freshmen would need remediation.

Two other proposals surfaced in 1995 to mitigate remediation. The first was to delay admission to students needing remediation until they could demonstrate they are prepared for college-level work. The other was that CSU bill high schools for the cost of remedial coursework to bring students' performance levels up to college-level expectations. Neither proposal was supported by the public, but CSU did accept their underlying premise: that CSU could best reach its remediation targets for 2007 with a solution that spanned the state's K-12 and postsecondary education systems.

As CSU realizes, meeting the 10 percent remediation goal by 2007 will require three key steps:

- High school teachers and students must understand CSU placement standards.
- K-12 schools and students must know as early as possible about their progress in meeting CSU standards.
- K-12 students who are not ready for college-level math and English classes must be helped before they reach CSU.

Actions to Solve the Problem

In the late 1990s, CSU began to discuss the remediation problem with a K-16 voluntary body called the Intersegmental Coordinating Committee (ICC) of the California Education Roundtable. The roundtable brings together representatives of all levels of education in the state; it consists of the heads of the three California public higher education systems (the University of California,

California State University, and California Community Colleges), plus a representative from the private colleges and the state's K-12 chief state school officer, who is elected. The ICC is composed of high-level administrators under each of the roundtable leaders.

After consulting with ICC, CSU decided to try several new strategies to lessen remediation. Reflecting the key steps needed to reach the 2007 goal, these initially focused on: better communication to K-12 schools about placement standards and assessments; encouraging high school juniors to take the CSU placement; and providing high school preparation for students with low scores.

This approach proved insufficient, however. The state already required so many K-12 assessments that schools and students resisted taking CSU's placement test. California has a High School Exit Exam, based mostly on Grade 7-9 standards, as well as the California Standards Tests, which reflect the state's eleventh-grade standards. Moreover, the cost and staff needed for CSU to assist the huge California K-12 education system effectively was daunting. Finally, several studies demonstrate significant discrepancies between required K-12 state tests and CSU's placement exams (Le 2002; Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio 2003).

Rather than administer another exam to high school students, in the late 1990s, CSU decided to negotiate directly with K-12 policymakers to merge CSU placement standards into the existing California Standards Tests, which are given to all students in eleventh grade. A new policy and test design group was formed, representing CSU and the California State Education Department (an advisory group to the California State Board of Education and the CSU Trustees). This group examined test items from several K-12 tests for their relationship to CSU standards, as well as for similarities between K-12 and CSU standards.

The State Board of Education negotiated with CSU to enhance existing K-12 standards-based

test to meet CSU placement standards. For example, as CSU requested, a writing sample was added to the existing K-12 multiple choice language arts test, as was an increased focus on Algebra 2 in the math test.

To develop this K-12 early assessment program, CSU gained support from the legislature, the California State Board of Education, the CSU Department of Education, the University of California, California Community Colleges, CSU faculty, and organizations of K-12 teachers and administrators. The development of an augmented eleventh-grade state assessment proceeded with these multiple stakeholders in mind.

In 2003, CSU set the scores that high school juniors would need to achieve to be exempt from its placement exams, and the state sent test results to rising seniors by August 1. Low-scoring students can now use the senior year for intensive preparation to meet CSU placement standards.

Common K-16 Standards

The CSU merged K-12 assessments strategy has many advantages, making this new K-16 collaboration deserving of close scrutiny by other states with high remediation rates. First, it gives a timely, targeted signal to students and schools of the need for added K-12 preparation. Moreover, by coordinating K-16 standards, it reduces the total testing time for students in high school and at CSU. In fact, it raises the stakes for statewide high school tests; previously, students saw no purpose for the eleventh-grade test because the SAT was used for admission and CSU had a separate placement test. This increases the academic focus during the senior year of high school for students who are not meeting CSU's placement standards.

Just as important, the strategy reforms and consolidates multiple K-16 school assessments, while providing better data for K-16 accountability concerning K-12 student preparation for CSU. Instead of the previous lack of alignment between

the standards for exiting high school and those for entering CSU, there are now common standards and performance levels across secondary and postsecondary education.

The CSU placement initiative is likely to be more successful than prior policies for a number of reasons. First, both secondary and postsecondary education will be working together. Previously, secondary educators had been unaware of CSU's placement standards, and high school students did not receive clear signals about what they need to know for placement at the credit level.

Moreover, CSU found that a top-down strategy from the university was insufficient, and collaboration with K-12 had more promise. And finally, in this era of tight and even shrinking state budgets, the combination of assessments saves the state money and testing time.

References

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¹ This paper benefited greatly from a speech given by Dr. David S. Spence, Executive Vice Chancellor, California State University, at a conference sponsored by the National Center for Higher Education and Public Policy, Los Gatos, California, June 2003.

² The University of California accepts the top 12 percent of state high school graduates, but the two systems require the same number and type of high school courses.