

Bridging the Remediation Gap

By Michael W. Kirst
Stanford University

September 9, 1998
Education Week

FOR ALL OF their efforts at enacting reform, educators and policymakers, like pilots in a fog bank, are too often flying blind. While they all share the common goal of improving student performance, they are too often acting at cross purposes, pressing forward with only a vague conception of what those around them are doing. Unless they can do a better job of coordinating reform initiatives at different levels within the educational system, the whole mission of better preparing more students for higher education could veer dangerously off course.

Nowhere is the danger more evident than in the profound disjuncture between K-12 education and postsecondary institutions. One indicator of this disjuncture is rising concern about students who fail university placement exams and must begin their college studies with “remedial courses.” The City University of New York is planning to withdraw admission to its four-year schools if students fail placement exams, and redirect the students to community colleges. This spring, the 22-campus California State University reported that a record 47 percent of freshmen had to take remedial English, and 54 percent enrolled in remedial math.

In 1995, nearly all public two-year institutions and 81 percent of public four-year institutions offered remedial courses; that fall, 29 percent of all first-time students enrolled in at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course. Here again, the problem is the disjuncture between K-12 and higher education. In the Southeast, for example, there are nearly 125 combinations of 75 different placement tests, all devised by university departments without regard to secondary school standards. Entering first-year students know little about the content of these exams, ensuring that many will score poorly and be placed in remedial courses.

This situation is particularly troubling for minority and immigrant students, as well as those whose families are low on the socioeconomic ladder. The current array of policies

sends vague and confusing signals to them about what is needed for university admissions and college placement. Many think getting good grades is the key to succeeding in college, not realizing that much depends on the results of placement tests of which they have little awareness. The more remedial courses students must take, the less their chances are of ever receiving a bachelor's degree.

What do state legislators and university officials say about the large numbers of students taking basic composition and math? Many blame high schools for a lack of academic rigor, but high schools contend that they are unaware of the content or stakes concerning university placement. Some policymakers contend that high remediation rates are caused by lax admission standards that do not encourage a rigorous college-prep curriculum. Education reformers stress that some placement exams are rapid-paced, multiple-choice exams that are not aligned with high school curricula. This assessment-alignment gap is a particular problem for students who attend high schools that stress performance assessments, portfolios, and math problem-solving. States and school districts are reluctant to pursue reforms more aggressively until they are sure higher education admissions and placement processes will accommodate their students. The result is stasis: Both sides are waiting for the other to pull the "trigger."

We must adjust, and even overhaul, the current melange of K-16 education policies that sends confusing signals to students and schools about what knowledge is worth knowing. Universities must collaborate with K-12 leaders and policymakers to improve policies that will enhance academic preparation, elevate education standards, and let prospective college students know what lies ahead.

To this end, my colleagues and I at the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement in Stanford, Calif., have generated recommendations based on case studies in three states and a literature review (further recommendations based on completed research in six states will be available in a few years). They are summarized as follows:

1. Require all students who want to enter four-year colleges or universities to complete at least four years of English, three years of math (including algebra), three years of science (one lab), three years of social studies, and two years of a foreign language.
2. Align freshman placement exams with other state standards, and publicize placement-exam content, standards, and consequences to students in high

school. At present, high school students do not know the content or standards of university placement examinations.

3. Permit high school seniors to submit subject-matter-based external exams, such as the New York Regents Exam and the California Golden State Exam, in lieu of university placement exams. Subject-matter external exams define achievement relative to an external academic standard and are keyed to the content of specific high school course requirements.
4. Take steps to rectify the “senior slump” caused by college policies that admit students based on their records in grades 9-11. For example, if students do not take math in their senior year, their math knowledge may erode so that they fail a math placement test during the summer following their senior year.
5. Require a writing sample for all admissions decisions. The SAT I and the ACT test writing solely through a multiple-choice test, but freshman placement tests usually require a writing sample. Consequently, universities admit students with no knowledge of how proficient they are at actual written tasks.
6. Standardize high school procedures for computing class rank and grade point average. At present, high schools in some states can choose any procedure to compute class rank, improving student chances for admission by leaving some courses (for example, jewelry making) in or out of their calculations. High grade point averages based on nonacademic courses lead to more remediation at universities.
7. Revive the original purpose of high school accreditation, which was to ensure the quality of the high school college-preparation program so that successful students would not need remediation in college. Accrediting agencies should assist universities in adjusting GPAs for schools that give grades that are considerably above or below typical state averages.
8. Have university-admissions policymakers review commercially produced K-12 standardized tests, and make statements about how well suited they are to assess or predict success at the university level. Many university placement exams are not aligned with these widely used commercial tests.

9. Inform the mass media and local education policymakers about freshman performance of students from specific high schools (including numbers needing remediation). Some states send reports on the percentage of students who fail placement tests to each high school, but these reports are rarely revealed to the public or discussed by local educators concerning possible policy changes to improve university preparation.

10. Evaluate university outreach programs to verify which have been most effective in getting “underserved” students to succeed at universities and avoid remediation.

Regardless of exactly what recommendations are finally adopted, it's clear that dramatic steps must be taken to bridge the gap between K-12 reform and postsecondary education. True, a small group of students—most of them from affluent, college-educated families—will always be able to succeed at universities. But for others the path is less clearly marked, and for them a new bridge must be built if they are to find their way across.