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AUTHOR Abraham, Ansely A.
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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted among 489 public colleges in the Southern Regional Education Board states to determine cutting scores for placing students into regular versus remedial college classes. Results indicated a large number and variety of tests in reading, writing, and mathematics--almost 100 combinations of 70 different tests--were used to place students. Both locally-developed and standardized tests were used. Thirty-one different reading tests were reported, most frequently the Nelson-Denny Reading Tests, the American College Test, Multiple Assessment Programs and Services--Descriptive Test of Language Skills (MAPS-DTLS), and the verbal Scholastic Aptitude Test. Thirty different writing tests were reported, including the American College Test--English, a sample essay, and a locally developed test. For mathematics, 118 colleges used an in-house test. In addition, 36 testing instruments were named, including the American College Test--Mathematics, Scholastic Aptitude Test, and MAPS. An examination of the cut-off scores used by the different colleges indicated a wide range of standards. On a reading test, the percentage of students eligible for college-level placement ranged from 57 percent to 99 percent, and on a mathematics test, from 6 percent to 86 percent. (GDC)

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COLLEGE-LEVEL STUDY: WHAT IS IT?

Variations in College Placement Tests and Standards in the SREB States

Why is it that in one college students need only a 7th grade reading level to begin credit work toward a degree, while at another college, students must read at the 13th grade level to enroll in degree-credit courses?

What does it mean that at one college students can score at the first percentile on a reading test (meaning that 99 percent of the students who took the test scored higher) and begin degree-credit courses, while at another college, students must score at the 43rd percentile to start degree-credit work?

And in mathematics, "the language of science," how does one interpret the fact that one college requires students to score at the 14th percentile to begin college-level mathematics, while at another, students are required to score at the 94th percentile?

What does it mean that nearly 100 test combinations of 70 different tests in reading, writing, and mathematics are used by colleges and universities in the SREB states to place students into degree-credit programs?

Institutions have different missions—and all are certainly not to be judged by ivy-league standards—but isn't it possible to have some general agreement about what constitutes college-level work?

An SREB study would seem to show that the wide variation among institutions in college placement standards means that there is very little consensus on what college-level work is. It is difficult to improve undergraduate education when what passes for college work may be at an advanced level or it may be at a high school level. Perhaps the first question to be answered in individual states is "How does the lack of agreement on what college-level work means affect the quality of undergraduate education?"

Placement versus Admission Standards

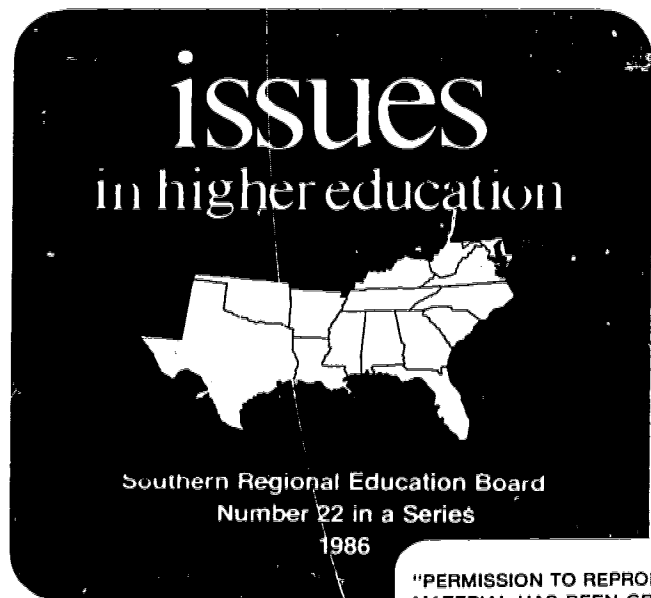
In discussions of entry-level standards for college, it is often confusing whether placement standards or admission standards are being addressed. While at times the standards or terms may be used interchangeably, this SREB study deals with standards for placement. Placement standards are used after students are admitted to college to help determine whether they are ready to begin degree-credit work. If students have the necessary skills,

they are placed in degree-credit (regular) college courses. If they do not, they are placed in remedial/developmental programs.

The admissions process, however, is different. Students are admitted who may lack the skills necessary to begin college-level work. For example, institutions with open-door admission policies may admit a majority of students who may not be ready to begin regular college work. Even institutions that require standards for admission often admit students who need additional assistance. This, of course, is not as big a problem in the institutions with more selective admissions criteria. Obviously, the more selective an institution, the fewer the number of students who will need assistance.

SREB Placement Survey

Educational reforms, especially those that concern standards and quality, are bringing to light the fact that colleges and universities use few common standards to make placement decisions—that is, decisions about



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whether entering students are ready to begin college-level work or whether they need remedial help. This raises the question, "What standards are being used by institutions of higher education in the SREB region to place students in appropriate levels of study?" An SREB survey of institutional remedial developmental programs in two-year and four-year colleges attempts to answer this question. Specifically, the survey describes the particular standards required by colleges and universities for placement into regular college degree-credit programs. "Standards" are defined here as the qualifying (cut-off) scores on particular tests required by institutions.

The survey was sent to 489 public two-year and four-year colleges in the SREB states: 186 were four-year and 303 were two-year institutions. *The overall response rate for the survey was 83 percent—88 percent for four-year institutions and 79 percent for two-year institutions.* Institutions were asked to identify the assessment instruments and scores required in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics to place students at either the remedial/developmental level or "regular" college-work level.

100 Test Combinations Used for College Placement

In the SREB states, almost 100 combinations of about 70 different tests in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics are used to place students in either college degree-credit or remedial development courses. Tests in all three areas range from in-house institutionally developed exams to nationally normed and standardized tests, such as the American College Test (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Some institutions use more than one test. A listing of the reading, writing, and mathematics tests used by colleges and universities in the SREB states will be found on page 5.

The large number and variety of tests that are used raise several questions. First is whether these tests measure different abilities and skills, or do they measure essentially the same abilities and skills? If the tests measure different abilities and skills, then it would be quite appropriate to choose different tests to "fit" the particular purposes determined by individual institutions. However,

TABLE 1
College Placement Tests Used By SREB Survey Respondents,
by Rank, for Reading, Writing, and Mathematics
1985-86

Rank	READING		WRITING		MATHEMATICS	
	Placement Test	Frequency of Use	Placement Test	Frequency of Use	Placement Test	Frequency of Use
1	Nelson-Danny	121	ACT—English	72	In-house/Institutionally Developed	118
2	ACT—Combined	43	In-house/Institutionally Developed	66	ACT—Mathematics	71
3	MAPS—Descriptive Test of Language Skills	37	Writing Sample/Essay	57	SAT—Mathematics	47
4	SAT—Verbal	35	Test of Standard Written English	53	MAPS—Descriptive Test of Mathematics Skills—Elementary Algebra	36
5	ASSET	29	ACT—Combined	36	State/System Developed Test	29
6	State/System Developed Test	27	SAT—Verbal	28	MAPS—Descriptive Test of Mathematics Skills—Intermediate Algebra	27
7	ACT—Social Studies	26	State/System Developed Test	28	ACT—Combined	26
8	MAPS—Comparative Guidance Placement Test—Reading	23	ASSET—Language Usage	24	MAPS—Comparative Guidance Placement—Mathematics C Test	23
9	ACT—English	18	MAPS—Comparative Guidance Placement Test—Writing	24	MAPS—Descriptive Test of Mathematics Skills—Arithmetic	22
10	Test of Adult Basic Education	12	Assessment and Placement Services for Community Colleges—Essay	15	ASSET—Numerical	17

TABLE 2
High and Low Cut-Off Scores for Placement in College Curriculum
with Percentile Equivalents of the Three Nationally Normed Tests Used Most Frequently
by SREB Survey Respondents
1985-86

READING					WRITING					MATHEMATICS				
Placement Test	Cut-Off Scores*		Percentile Conversion of Cut-Off Scores		Placement Test	Cut-Off Scores*		Percentile Conversion of Cut-Off Scores		Placement Test	Cut-Off Scores*		Percentile Conversion of Cut-Off Scores	
	Lowest	Highest	Lowest	Highest		Lowest	Highest	Lowest	Highest		Lowest	Highest	Lowest	Highest
Nelson-Denny	7	13	1	43	ACT-English	9	19	5	51	ACT-Math	8	21	14	61
ACT-Combined	10	18	7	44	TSWE	19	43	1	49	SAT-Math	320	525	10	65
MAPS-DTLS	11	19	1	66	ACT-Combined	10	20	7	56	MAPS-DTMS	1	18	14	94

* Cut-off scores are the scaled scores, NOT raw scores.

Table 2 presents the range (lowest to highest) of cut-off scores used by institutions for course placement at the entering college level for the three most frequently used nationally normed tests in reading, writing, and mathematics. Also included are the converted percentile ranks of the low and high cut-off scores. For example, institutions that employ the Nelson-Denny Reading Test for placement set cut-off scores ranging from the 7th grade to the 13th grade reading levels. The range of scores, 7 to 13, is equivalent to a rank from the first percentile to the 43rd. This means that at the low end of the scale, some colleges use placement scores that are the lowest possible—only one percent of all the students across the nation who took the test scored lower. Conversely, at the high end of the scale, some institutions are using cut-off scores at a level for which 43 percent of the testing population scored lower.

Another way of looking at the scores for the Nelson-Denny is that institutions are using placement scores so low that 99 percent of the test takers would have been allowed to enter the "regular" college-level curriculum at that institution. Other institutions are using cut-off scores on the same test that would allow only 57 percent of the students taking the test to be placed in entry-level college

credit courses.

In each area of curriculum placement (reading, writing, and mathematics), it is startling to note the range of scores being used to place students into college entry-level courses. The most extreme example of this practice is shown for the mathematics MAPS-DTMS test, for which cut-off scores ranged from 1 to 18. The equivalent percentile ranks for these scores are 14 and 94. This means that at an institution using a cut-off score of 1—all but 14 percent earned a score of 1—nearly all students would have been placed in regular college mathematics courses. At the other extreme, in those institutions with a cut-off score of 18, only 6 percent of the students would have been able to enter regular college mathematics courses.

The notion of "college-level" obviously varies greatly among public two-year and four-year institutions in the SREB region. In fact, depending on the test selected, these data indicate that entry-level placement is based on scores that vary from as low as the 1st percentile to as high as the 94th percentile. The implications are obvious. It is difficult to discuss such issues as standards, quality, or improving undergraduate education when the notion of "college-level work" varies so widely.

"Variety" in and of itself is not unexpected. For exam-

ple, readiness for the most selective institutions is not expected to be the same as readiness for the open-door and less selective institutions. However, what can be expected is that there should be some understanding among all colleges as to what standards of skill and knowledge should be expected of all students seeking to enter any institution. This is not to suggest that all institutions should have the same, or a very narrow, definition of college-level work. It does suggest, however, that a "minimum competence" level be established below which degree credit will not be awarded. It also suggests a "floor" of competence on which other distinctions between institutions can be built.

This edition of *Issues in Higher Education* was prepared by Ansley A. Abraham, SREB research associate.

College-Level Placement Tests Used by Colleges and Universities in the SREB States

Reading Tests

American College Testing (ACT)—Combined
 ACT—Social Studies subtest
 ACT—English subtest
 ACT—Natural Science subtest
 Assessment and Placement Services for
 Community Colleges—Reading
 ASSET—Reading
 California Achievement Test (CAT)
 Carver Reading Progress Scale
 College Board Computer Placement Test—Reading
 Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)
 Davis Reading Test
 Gates-MacGinitie
 GED Practice Test
 Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich—Audio-Visual
 Technical Test of Reading
 In-house/Institutionally Developed
 Iowa Silent Reading Test
 McGraw-Hill Reading Test
 Multiple Assessment Programs and Services
 (MAPS)—Descriptive Test of Language Skills
 (DTLS)—Reading
 MAPS—Reading (Self-scoring placement)
 MAPS—DTLS—Logical Relationship
 MAPS—Comparative Guidance/
 Placement(CGP)—Reading Placement
 Nelson-Denny Reading Test
 Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)—Combined
 SAT—Verbal
 School and College Achievement Test (SCAT)
 Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test
 Stanford Test of Academic Skills
 State/System Developed Test
 Test of Academic Skills (TASK)
 Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)

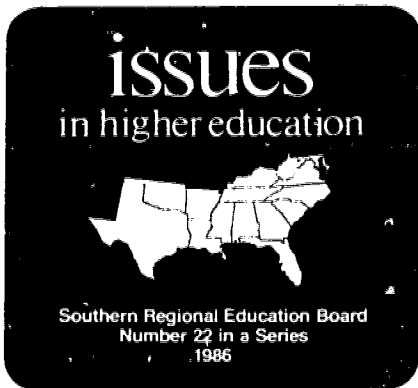
Writing Tests

ACT—Combined
 ACT—English Subtest
 ACT—Social Studies Section
 Assessment and Placement Services for
 Community Colleges—Essay
 Assessment and Placement Services for
 Community Colleges—Writing
 ASSET—Advanced Language Skills
 ASSET—Language Usage
 California Achievement Test (CAT)
 College Board Computer Placement Test—
 Sentence Skills
 College Board—Written English Expression Test
 Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)
 Cooperative School College Ability Test (SCAT)
 Differential Aptitude Test (DAT)—Language Usage
 In-house/Institutionally Developed
 MAPS—DTLS—Usage Test
 MAPS—DTLS—Sentence Structure Test

MAPS—CGP—Writing Placement
 MAPS—Written English Expression (Self-scoring
 placement)
 McGraw-Hill Basic Writing
 Purdue High School Test of English
 SAT—Verbal
 SAT—Combined
 Stanford Test of Academic Skills
 State/System Developed Test
 TASK
 Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)
 Test of Standard Written English (TSWE)
 The Cooperative English Test (CET)
 Writing Sample/Essay

Mathematics Tests

ACT—Combined
 ACT—Math subtest
 Assessment and Placement Services for
 Community Colleges—Math
 ASSET—Intermediate Algebra
 ASSET—Elementary Algebra
 ASSET—College Algebra
 ASSET—Numerical
 Association of Community and Junior Colleges
 Math Placement Test
 California Achievement Test (CAT)
 College Board Computer Placement Test—
 Arithmetic
 College Board Computer Placement Test—
 Elementary Algebra
 College Entrance Examination Board—Math
 Achievement Test
 The Comprehensive Math Test (CMT)
 Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)
 Cooperative School College Ability Test (SCAT)
 In-house/Institutionally Developed
 MAPS—Applied Arithmetic (Self-scoring
 placement)
 MAPS—CGP—Mathematics C, D, and E Tests
 MAPS—Computation (Self-scoring placement)
 MAPS—Descriptive Test of Mathematics Skills
 (DTMS)—Arithmetic Skills Test
 MAPS—DTMS—Elementary Algebra Skills Test
 MAPS—DTMS—Intermediate Algebra Skills Test
 MAPS—DTMS—Mathematics Graphs Test
 MAPS—Elementary Algebra (Self-scoring
 placement)
 MAPS—Intermediate Algebra
 Mathematics Association, American Placement
 Test Battery
 Mathematical Association of America
 SAT—Combined
 SAT—Math
 Speece/Word Mathematics Test
 Stanford Test of Academic Skills
 State/System Developed Test
 TASK
 Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)



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