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Issues in Basic Skills Assessment and Placement In the California Community Colleges

THE ACADEMIC SENATE FOR CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Basic Skills Committee 2003-2004

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Abstract

When the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges compiled best practices for serving basic skills students in 2002-2003, assessment practices were notably absent. In this paper, problems with current assessment and placement practices with regards to basic skills are explored. The paper begins with a review of the matriculation process and the most appropriate assessment instruments for use in placing basic skills students into courses. Issues confronting the assessment and placement process are presented, including the stigma of the "basic skills" label, the particular difficulties faced by non-native speakers of English, and the lack of resources for adequate orientation and counseling for entering basic skills students. Concerns about the disparity between the number of students assessed and the number who actually enroll in basic skills are also reviewed. The paper moves on to discuss how best to measure "success" in basic skills, vital to appropriate evaluation of our current assessment and placement processes. Based on the discussion in the paper, several recommendations for improving the overall success of basic skills students in the community colleges are made.

Introduction

A central mission of the California community colleges is to provide instruction and support services to students who are not prepared to succeed in college-level coursework. Under a previous Fund for Instructional Improvement (FII) grant, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges published a paper, *A Survey of Effective Practices in Basic Skills,* on best practices in developmental education and model programs in community colleges throughout the state. The Senate has followed up on the work done for this grant by showcasing model programs at each plenary session and linking to successful programs on its website in order to better disseminate information about model programs to other colleges.

In its research for the aforementioned paper two key issues emerged. First, no college in the system identified its assessment/placement process as a model practice. Second, more than one-third of students who were assessed as needing further work in basic skills mathematics and English did not enroll in basic skills courses.

In order to gather more information on the key issues of assessment and placement, the Academic Senate applied for and received a Board of Governors' research grant. In addition to exploring problems in assessment and placement, the Senate also researched issues with enrollment after assessment and how to measure the success of basic skills practices. At the Fall 2003 Plenary Session of the Academic Senate, a breakout session was conducted to ask senate leaders about core issues in placement and assessment. Based on this discussion, the Basic Skills Committee of the Academic Senate formulated a survey which went out to all colleges in the system. Eighty-seven of the 109 colleges responded. The research, discussions, and survey results form the basis for this paper.

Matriculation

Before discussing assessment and placement, it is important to understand the context in which they operate, which is known as matriculation. Matriculation is a process that provides students with a series of steps to follow to promote success in their educational pursuits. When followed, these steps ensure that students have accurate and timely information, assist them to establish educational goals, and help them to achieve these goals. As defined in Title 5 §55520, matriculation minimally comprises these components:

- application for admission
- assessment
- orientation
- counseling or advisement
- development of an educational plan
- evaluation of progress
- support services such as financial aid, health services, tutoring
- specialized curriculum such as basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.

The matriculation process is intended to ensure that all students have access to higher educational opportunities. Ideally, students take advantage of all components of matriculation. The responses to the 2004 Basic Skills Survey, coupled with discussions at Academic Senate Plenary Sessions and data from the 2001 Basic Skills Survey, point to significant challenges with the assessment component as related to basic skills students.

Assessment Instruments

Section 55502 of Title 5 contains the following definitions related to assessment:

(b) "assessment" means the process of gathering information about individual students to facilitate student success. Assessment may include, but is not limited to, information regarding the student's study skills, English language proficiency, computational skills, aptitudes, goals, learning skills, career aspirations, academic performance, and need for special services. Assessment involves the collection of such information at any time, before or after enrollment, except that the process of assigning a grade by an instructor shall not be considered part of the assessment process. Once a grade has been assigned and recorded in a student's transcript it can be used in the assessment process.

(c) "assessment instruments, methods or procedures" means one or more assessment instruments, assessment methods, or assessment procedures, or any combination thereof. These include, but are not limited to, interviews, standardized tests, holistic scoring processes, attitude surveys, vocational or career aptitude and interest inventories, high school or college transcripts, specialized certificates or licenses, educational histories and other measures of performance. The term "assessment instruments, methods or procedures" also includes assessment procedures such as the identification of test scores which measure particular skill

> levels, the administrative process by which students are referred for assessment, the manner in which assessment sessions are conducted, the manner in which assessment results are made available, and the length of time required before such results are available.

Furthermore, Section 55202 states that the use of assessment as a prerequisite for placement into a course requires the use of multiple measures:

> (c) The determination of whether a student meets a prerequisite shall be based on successful completion of an appropriate course or on an assessment using multiple measures. Any assessment instrument used shall be selected and used in accordance with the provisions of Subchapter 6 (commending with §55500) of Chapter 6 of this Division.

The Chancellor's Office Student Assessment Services web page gives a listing of the 128 assessment testing instruments used in California community colleges and the number of students who take them (Appendix A). In addition to these tests, colleges report a variety of other factors used to place students into mathematics and English classes. More than 60% of the colleges responding to the 2004 Academic Senate Basic Skills Survey use transcript information from high school or other colleges. More than a quarter use information gathered from personal interviews and over ten percent gauge student motivation as a factor in placement. Other factors reported include SAT scores, other personal information, and faculty recommendation.

While 75% of respondents to the survey indicate that their assessment processes adequately place students into basic skills courses, 25% indicate that their processes do not do so. Based on data from the Chancellor's Office Matriculation Services website, this translates to approximately 337,000 students of the over 2.4 million students enrolled in 2002-2003 having been potentially misdirected in terms of the courses they need to develop their writing, reading, and computation skills in preparation for college-level work.

A second challenge is the lack of assessment for students in noncredit programs. Many community college students begin in noncredit courses. According to Chancellor's Office data for 2002-2003, colleges in the system reported 49 sections of noncredit basic skills mathematics, 79 sections of noncredit basic skills English, and 1,708 sections of noncredit English as a Second Language (ESL). Matriculation data shows that the vast majority of noncredit students are exempt from assessment testing. As a result, there is incomplete information regarding basic skills placement and assessment for the nearly 400,000 noncredit students in the system. Six million dollars has been included in the 2004-2005 system budget, specifically targeted towards noncredit matriculation, but the lack of data for noncredit programs is a significant problem.

There are, in addition, other significant problems in assessment processes. Research of assessment literature, discussions with faculty at Academic Senate Plenary Sessions and responses from faculty and staff to the two Basic Skills Surveys (2004 and 2001) reveal problems in several areas:

1. the appropriateness of placement tests,
2. validation of placement tests,
3. the validity of additional measures, and
4. getting students to the most appropriate test.

The Best Test

There are two types of tests used for basic skills assessment: objective and subjective. Objective tests consist of items where students choose answers from a given list. Scoring is objective since the answer is either correct or incorrect. Multiple-choice tests such as the Nelson Denny reading tests, the ASSET writing skills test, and the ACT Compass Algebra tests fall into this category. Subjective tests require student responses that evaluators score on the basis of their judgment using established criteria. Evaluators typically undergo training before reading a subjective test in order to establish inter-reader reliability and consistency in test scoring. A locally established test that includes a writing sample or an oral interview is an example of a subjective test.

Which type of test is better? Current assessment testing for mathematics consists only of objective tests. Communications with mathematics organizations such as the American Mathematical Association of Two-Year Colleges (AMATYC) and the California Mathematics Council Community Colleges (CMC[3]) reveal that the only known subjective mathematics test questions were developed by the Mathematics Diagnostic Testing Project (MDTP) at UC San Diego, but the MDTP states that their subjective test are expressly for classroom evaluation of student progress and not for placement purposes (Anthony, 2004).

In the area of reading, a similar reliance on objective tests exists. Reading tests generally comprise a reading selection followed by multiple-choice questions about the reading.

However, in the area of writing assessment, support for the use of subjective tests is strong. Crusan (2002) reviewed articles on the relative merits of direct testing (testing writing with a writing test) vs. indirect testing (testing writing with a multiple-choice test) and found that despite the lack of quantitative data, research in writing assessment theory favors direct assessment.

According to the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (4Cs) 1995 position statement on writing assessment, several key issues are germane to how students are assessed in community colleges, one being the unfair discrimination inherent in objective tests.

> *[S]tandardized tests, usually developed by large testing organizations, tend to be for accountability purposes, and when used to make statements about student learning, misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color.* This imbalance tends to decrease when tests are directly related to specific contexts and purposes, in contrast to tests that purport to differentiate between "good" and "bad" writing in a general sense. Furthermore, standardized tests tend to focus on readily accessed features of the language—on grammatical correctness and stylistic choice—and on error, on what is wrong rather than on the appropriate rhetorical choices that have been made. Consequently, the outcome of such assessments is negative: students are said to demonstrate what they do "wrong" with language rather than what they do well.

The 4Cs also points out that the wrong type of assessment instrument may encourage mistaken notions about what constitutes "good writing."

> *[T]he means used to test students' writing ability shapes what they, too, consider writing to be.* If students are asked to produce "good" writing within a given period of time, they often conclude that all good writing is generated within those constraints. If students are asked to select—in a multiple choice format—the best grammatical and stylistic choices, they will conclude that good writing is "correct" writing. They will see writing erroneously, as the avoidance of error; they will think that grammar and style exist apart from overall purpose and discourse design.

Though the Academic Senate survey results indicate a significant preference for the use of writing samples, slightly less than 40% of respondents use a writing sample in the assessment process. Of the 60% that do not, only 20% indicate no perceived need for a writing sample. Instead, respondents cite expense (86%) and the time needed for evaluation (74%) as the primary reasons for not requiring a writing sample. Beyond that, an additional complication arises with the assessment and placement of English as a Second Language (ESL) students, also referred to as second language (L2) learners. One-third of the nearly 40% of survey respondents who employ writing samples do so exclusively for L2 learners, a little more than 13% of all responses—while eight of the responding colleges, about 11% of the sample, offer a writing sample as part of the multiple measures used to place both native and non-native speakers into ESL and English courses. Use of a writing sample for assessment is consistent with the first of four recommendations in the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office report *California Pathways: The Second Language Student in Public High Schools, Colleges & Universities*, which emphasizes that effective practices for assessment and placement of non-native speakers of English include these characteristics:

1. direct language assessment measures (e.g., a writing sample or oral interview), with raters trained to assess the language proficiency of L2 [second language] learners.
2. indirect language assessment measures (e.g., reading or grammar tests) which have been designed for and validated on L2 learners.
3. background information pertaining to education and language exposure (e.g., age of arrival in the U.S., years of schooling, and home language use).
4. instruments that not only place students in needed ESL or SDAIE [Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English] courses, but are also capable of placing L2 learners whose skills show they no longer require ESL instruction in appropriate English courses designed for native speakers. (p. 44)

It is of note that some colleges, such as Las Positas and Yuba Colleges, have done local research on the correlation between direct and indirect assessment with their student population. Las Positas found the correlation for native speakers so consistent that they dropped the direct writing sample. A writing sample, however, was retained for L2 learners (Keener, 2004).

Validation of assessment tests remains a problem as well. Title 5 regulations are explicit regarding the validation of assessment tests and associated cut scores used in placement. As stated in §55201(e):

The lack of resources to validate assessment instruments and to establish appropriate cut scores for course placement seriously impedes a college's ability to direct students to appropriate coursework.

> (e) A course in communication or computation skills may be established as a prerequisite or corequisite for any course other than another course in communication or computation skills only if, in addition to conducting a content review, the district gathers data according to sound research practices and shows that a student is highly unlikely to succeed in the course unless the student has met the proposed prerequisite or corequisite. If the curriculum committee initially determines, pursuant to §50002(a)(2)(E), that a new course needs to have a communication or computation skill prerequisite or corequisite, then despite Subsection (d) of this Section, the prerequisite or corequisite may be established for a single period of not more than two years while the research is being conducted and the final determination is being made, provided that all other requirements for establishing the prerequisite or corequisite have been met.

Such validation requires significant support from research staff at a college. However, with recent cuts to college budgets, many colleges have lost research staff, adding to the problem. As Harriett Robles, President of the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges, expressed in her May 21, 2004, letter to Chancellor Mark Drummond, "...as colleges have been forced to make deep budget cuts, research functions have been among the first to be eliminated. Fewer colleges have the research expertise to devote to assessment, much less any other element of student and institutional effectiveness." To follow up on this concern, the Research and Planning Group will be conducting a survey in Fall 2004 in order to ascertain the state of institutional research in the community colleges (Rudman, 2004). Reflective of the lack of research capacity, in the 2001 Basic Skills Survey, one-fifth of colleges responding indicate that validation of assessment tests has not been completed or even begun.

The lack of resources to validate assessment instruments and to establish appropriate cut scores for course placement seriously impedes a college's ability to direct students to appropriate coursework. Even the "best test" is of little value if its results cannot be accurately correlated to a college's programs and courses.

Preparation of High School Graduates

The majority of students entering community colleges are markedly under-prepared for college course work. According to data collected for the Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education's 2002 *The California Master Plan for Education*, in 2001 less than half of 10th and 11th grade students demonstrated a proficiency in mathematics appropriate to those grade levels. In the same year, less than a third of both grades earned scores rating them proficient or higher on the English Language Arts (a component of the California High School Exit Exam—CAHSEE) test. Data also show that almost 50% of CSU freshman lack college-level proficiency in mathematics or English and 35% of UC freshman lack college-level proficiency in English.

While matriculation reporting in the California community colleges requires information about the number of students who undergo assessment testing, there is no requirement for data related to how students place based on assessment results. Data from the Chancellor's Office for the preparation of the Academic Senate paper *A Survey of Effective Practices in Basic Skills* indicate that approximately 50% of community college students require basic skills instruction, an estimate that is supported by the 2001 Basic Skills Survey results.

Taken as a whole, the data cited above is of significant concern to legislators who see a lack of preparation as an impediment to renewed economic and cultural vitality in California. The additional units of basic skills coursework needed by many students may also contribute to the misperception among legislators and our higher education partners that community college students are taking excessive and unnecessary units prior to transfer. However, at the community colleges, this lack of preparation has other implications for assessment and placement.

Counseling and basic skills faculty participating in the Fall 2003 Plenary Session on basic skills raised two factors that complicate assessment and placement: 1) students regard basic skills classes as a stigma and 2) students want to complete degree-applicable course work as quickly as they can. First, there is a formidable stigma attached to being placed in basic skills courses. Many incoming community college students who place into basic skills courses have successfully completed what they consider comparable courses in high school and may even have received high grades in their mathematics and English courses. Second, counseling faculty report that numerous students express a need to complete transfer requirements or degrees quickly. As a result, many students employ strategies to circumvent placement recommendations. One such strategy

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is "college shopping" or "assessment shopping," particularly in urban areas where colleges are in close proximity. Students undergo the placement/assessment process at several colleges in their geographical area and ultimately choose the one at which they achieve the best placement/assessment result. At the time of this writing, this phenomenon has been reported but has not been statistically documented.

This issue of "college shopping" is also of concern because of the use of high school grades to waive placement prerequisites. According to the 2004 Basic Skills Survey, slightly over 20% of colleges responding waive placement prerequisites based on high school grades. Since 50% of CSU entering freshmen lack proficiency in English and mathematics, it is likely that the use of high school grades as a primary factor to waive placement prerequisites often results in inadequately-prepared students being placed in college-level courses.

The stigma attached to placement in basic skills courses extends to ESL courses as well. Particularly for those non-native speakers who begin their education in the United States in high school or before, there is the perception by these students that because they have completed high school they no longer need the special courses targeted to non-native speakers. Also, since beginning college work at the ESL level can add several years to the total time-to-degree, non-native speakers elect the assessment test for native speakers, which at the most will place a student at three levels below Freshman composition.

Practices that allow students to circumvent college placement strategies have implications for the data collected on basic skills students. In the first situation, "college shopping" results in a greater disparity in students tested as needing basic skills and those actually enrolling in a course. In the second situation, the placement of non-native speakers into basic skills courses for which they are not prepared increases the perception among faculty that assessment processes are inaccurate.

Native Speakers vs. Non-Native Speakers

In addition to the potential stigma of both basic skills and ESL courses, whether or not the student being assessed is a native or non-native speaker has important implications for the assessment process. For many non-native speakers, especially recent arrivals to the United States, the first barrier to attending a community college is simply getting information about the registration process. If a student belongs to a linguistic group of significant size in a college's service area, the chances are that registration information is provided in print form in the student's native language. Where possible, colleges hire multi-lingual staff to reduce the language barriers for potential students.

A significant problem exists when appropriately assessing non-native speakers of English. For recent immigrants who may be better served by ESL courses, there is the confusion of which assessment test to take. The vast majority of community colleges offer both an English assessment test and an ESL assessment test. Recent arrivals unfamiliar with the differentiation may select the English assessment.

As discussed in a previous section, theory in writing assessment favors the use of a writing sample for placement. To determine how students are encouraged to take the appropriate test, the Academic Senate followed up with the eight community colleges that offer a writing sample as part of the multiple measures used to place both native and non-native speakers into ESL and English courses. The responses show that students generally self-selected their assessment test with no guidance. Students wishing to be assessed simply show up at published times and receive no feedback from any staff member prior to taking the tests themselves. For students who show up at a college's assessment office, intake clerks are the primary source of advisement as to assessment options. One college notes that special training is provided to intake clerks to guide students to the right test, but this does not seem to be a common practice. At another college, students who are uncertain about which test to take are advised to take both ESL and English tests.

For non-native speakers who take an inappropriate assessment test for language, the results are often frustration and a waste of time. Assessment tests designed for native speakers cannot provide the fine distinctions needed at the lower levels. As a result, non-native speakers end up inappropriately placed in the lowest basic skills course offered. At some colleges, this situation can be immediately addressed through the application of other placement factors such as years of schooling in the United States or language spoken in the home to find a more accurate placement. At other colleges, a student either wastes a term enrolled in a course that does not address his/her needs, or the student drops out and waits for the following term.

It is of note that the Chancellor's Office Student Assessment Services web page shows that 23 of California's 109 community colleges offer only one English assessment for native and non-native students. Given the special needs of non-native speakers, the lack of language assessment specifically targeted to non-native speakers merits further investigation as to how the assessment needs of non-native speakers are being addressed at these colleges.

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Orientation

Orientation, like assessment, is a mandated component of the matriculation process. Section 55502(j) of Title 5 defines orientation as "a process which acquaints students and potential students with college programs, services, facilities and grounds, academic expectations, and institutional procedures." Information on college procedures, courses, financial aid, and support services may be offered in a variety of formats, from handouts and CDs to video or live presentations.

Orientation, and live presentations in particular, can play an important role in encouraging students to enroll in the basic skills or ESL courses suggested to them through the assessment process. Follow up with the eight colleges mentioned in the previous section demonstrates that such orientation is taking place. All of the colleges offer separate orientations for students taking the English assessment test vs. those taking the ESL assessment test. In ESL orientations, particular emphasis is placed on the importance of the ESL curriculum to future success in college work. At several colleges, ESL faculty are involved in the orientations. One college offers orientation sessions targeted to specific language populations when possible. Several of the colleges offer targeted orientations to students who place in pre-collegiate English courses, but several do not.

Orientation, however, is effective only if students are required to attend. According to Matriculation Services data obtained from the Chancellor's Office website, of the approximately 2.4 million credit students enrolled in the system in 2002-2003 (unduplicated headcount), 1.5 million were directed to orientation under matriculation guidelines and the remainder exempted. Of the 1.5 million required to undergo orientation, only one million received it. Of the 393,322 noncredit students enrolled, 44,776 were directed to orientation, but only 26,380 received it.

Counselors are another vital component in the orientation process, providing individualized assistance with educational planning. In addition, counselors are well-placed to explain to students the importance of the need to take basic skills and ESL courses. However, the number of counselors available at community colleges to assist students is woefully inadequate. According to information compiled for the *Consultation Council Task Force on Counseling*, the ideal ratio of counselor to students is between 1:300 (Carnegie Report) and 1:900 (Program-based Funding Standards) (p.10). The Community College Chancellor's Office *Real Cost Project: Preliminary Report* recommended a ratio of 1:370. Fall 2000 data provided by the Chancellor's Office shows, however, a current ratio of 1:1,918.

Equally disturbing is counseling data from the Matriculation Services web page of the Chancellor's Office website. Of the 2.4 million students enrolled in 2002-2003, over 1.5 million were directed to counseling services at some point. However, only 555,000 actually received counseling services, leaving almost two-thirds of students so directed unserved.

The number of counselors available at community colleges to assist students is woefully inadequate.

Enrollment

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In addition to orientation, the most often cited way to encourage enrollment in basic skills courses is the enforcement of placement prerequisites. According to the 2004 Basic Skills Survey, 64% of colleges responding use assessment data for mandatory placements into courses. An overlapping 67% of colleges also use assessment data for recommended placements. While these data do not necessarily indicate that a third of colleges do not enforce prerequisites based on placement data, there is cause for concern. Not surprisingly, nearly 18% of the respondents cite a lack of enforcement of prerequisites as a problem with their current placement/assessment process.

On this survey, colleges were also asked how assessment and placement data are used. In addition to the actual placement of students into courses, approximately one quarter of the respondents indicate that assessment data helps determine the number of sections of basic skills courses offered and the availability of student services for basic skills students. However, due to current budget pressures and the need for minimum class sizes, colleges are no longer very flexible in adding courses that may or may not fill even when increased numbers of students demonstrate a need for basic skills work. As a result, several colleges specifically mention that course offerings in basic skills are inadequate to meet student demand.

Respondents also mention a logistical problem in the timing of assessment and enrollment. Students who are assessed early in an assessment cycle may not be able to begin a class for many months, reducing the probability of actual enrollment. For example, a student who undergoes assessment in late spring may find that a course is not offered in the summer and must wait until the fall to begin a course. For students who are assessed just before the beginning of a term, there may not be enough time to enroll. Especially when free-response questions (e.g., writing samples) are used, evaluation by trained faculty may take days, which can delay a student's opportunity to enroll in classes. Respondents to the survey also express the concern that assessment centers are inadequately staffed, especially for the rush before the beginning of a new term. The result is that some students do not receive their assessment results before a term begins, effectively preventing them from enrolling in time to begin the term.

However, enrollment in basic skills and ESL courses involves one additional important issue: when students actually begin coursework to address their language and mathematics needs. Basic skills and ESL courses are the foundations for the other work a student will do at a community college. When a student does not enroll in these courses, whether due to perceived stigma or lack of availability, a student jeopardizes his/her ability to successfully pursue college-level work. While the CSUs and UCs both impose deadlines for addressing remediation in language and mathematics skills, the California community colleges do not.

What is Basic Skills—Measuring Our Success

Evaluating the efficacy of assessment and placement practices requires clear measures of the success of students in basic skills. However, there are two very different definitions of "success" for basic skills students.

One commonly accepted definition, one that is used as a general measure of "success" for all courses, is successful completion of a course with a grade of C or better. Most data collected in support of successful basic skills programs focus on retention and successful completion of a basic skills course and persistence to the next course in the sequence. Reporting for Partnership for Excellence went one step further and looked at successful student completion of the course in the same discipline (mathematics or English) immediately following a basic skills course, which may or may not be another basic skills course.

However, the extent to which a student is successful in basic skills coursework is truly reflected only in his/her ability to successfully complete college-level coursework, the work for which basic skills courses are preparing students. Under this perspective, "success" in basic skills cannot be determined until a student demonstrates English or mathematics competency in a non-basic skills class, often labeled by the term "college-level" or "transfer-level."

ESL students are by Title 5 definition classified as basic skills students according to the definition of "precollegiate basic skills" in §55202d:

> (d) "precollegiate basic skills courses" are those courses in reading, writing, computation, learning skills, study skills, and English as a Second Language which are designated by the community college district as nondegree credit courses pursuant to §55002(b) of this Part.

However, faculty who work with ESL students argue that "success" for such students in basic skills courses is very different than "success" for native speakers. As stated in the California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages position paper *The Differences Between English As A Second Language And Basic Skills Instruction At Post-Secondary Levels* (1994)*:*

> The needs of ESL students are not well served by treating ESL as a variety of "remedial" or basic skills education. A distinction at post-secondary levels of education must be made between students who are still at a developmental stage of acquiring English (ESL students) and students whose dominant language is English but who lack academic literacy/basic skills (basic skills students). These two types of students are best served by instruction which recognizes their different backgrounds and needs. Neither should be labeled remedial, a term which suggests that they need to make

When a student does not enroll in these courses [basic skills and ESL courses], whether due to perceived stigma or lack of availability, a student jeopardizes his/her ability to successfully pursue college-level work.

> up for deficiencies; both types of students are involved in the cognitively demanding process of acquiring academic English.

Recognizing the critical differences facing non-native speakers of English, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors is funding a grant project to specifically examine issues that impede the progress of non-native speakers of English and affect their success in college-level work. The Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS) has been awarded the grant for 2004-2005.

Given the two definitions above, it would appear that the second definition, which focuses on success in college-level courses, would serve the needs of both native and non-native speakers. In Title 5 definitions of basic skills, the term "college-level" is regularly used to contrast with "basic skills."

> Section 55002 (b): Courses designated to enable students to succeed in college-level work (including but not limited to college orientation and guidance courses, and discipline specific preparatory courses such as biology, history, or electronics) that integrate basic skills instruction throughout and assign grades partly upon the demonstration of mastery of those skills.
>
> Section 55002 (1) (c): Precollegiate occupational courses designed to provide foundation skills for students preparing for entry into college-level occupational courses or programs.

However, the term "college-level" has many interpretations, and this lack of common understanding further hinders the use of "success in a college-level course" as a definition of success in basic skills.

The extent to which a student is successful in basic skills coursework is truly reflected only in his/her ability to successfully complete college-level coursework, the work for which basic skills courses are preparing students.

The reliability and validity of basic skills assessment and placement are contingent upon clearly defined definitions of the skills being assessed, the measures being employed, and the specific purposes for which they are designed.

In the area of mathematics, there is common agreement across the nation that Elementary Statistics, Calculus, and Finite Mathematics are college-level mathematics courses. However, there is no agreed-upon definition for the courses that come below. This lack of consensus is nation-wide and across the segments of higher education in the State of California. Elementary algebra is currently the statewide graduation requirement for an Associate's degree. As such, it is considered a college-level course, according to Title 5 guidelines. However, many of California's community colleges require Intermediate Algebra for graduation. At those schools, Elementary Algebra would not be considered college-level but precollegiate basic skills. At both the CSUs and UCs, both Elementary Algebra and Intermediate Algebra are considered basic skills courses, not college-level. To further complicate the issue, at the CSUs, trigonometry and both pre-calculus courses in a two-term sequence are considered college-level. At the UCs, however, trigonometry and the first term of pre-calculus in a two-term sequence are not college-level, but the second term of pre-calculus is a college-level course.

In the area of English, freshman composition is commonly considered a college-level course. It

is universally transferable across the State of California. However, in the community colleges, the equivalent of Subject A, a course one level below freshman composition and therefore identified as remedial by UC, is the current minimum graduation requirement for an Associate's degree.

Reading is another important aspect of basic skills instruction. However, there is no freshman-level reading course at either the UC or the CSU. At the community colleges, the status of reading courses varies widely. At some, reading classes are all considered basic skills courses. At others, reading courses are offered for credit towards an Associate degree.

The workplace imposes another dimension to the definition of basic skills. Employers stress the need for workers to have good oral and written communication skills, the ability to read and interpret often technical writing, and think critically on the job. However, these abilities are difficult to correlate with the courses and levels that comprise basic skills instruction at the community colleges.

At the Spring 2004 Plenary Session, the Academic Senate Basic Skills Committee conducted a breakout at which a large number of faculty gathered for a discussion of how to define "basic skills" as a part of working towards achieving a new definition of "success." While there was no clear definition, a generally accepted definition of "basic skills" was "skills necessary and common to all curriculum-specific courses." The Basic Skills Committee is continuing this discussion as part of its 2004-2005 goals.

Just as the term "basic skills" is hard to pin down, the definition of "college level" is no more specific. Participants emphasized the need to "think abstractly in order to solve problems," the "ability to handle complex concepts and ideas, ability to analyze and synthesize," or "a skill level sufficient for participation in the academic discourse community." While many faculty at the discussion noted that students in basic skills courses employ these skills, the difference between basic skills and college-level being a degree of sophistication, the participants were not prepared to draw the line that distinguishes between the two levels.

The definition of "success" in basic skills goes beyond the difficulty of defining "basic skills" and "college-level." Data indicating the continuing lack of preparedness for college-level work has prompted concern beyond the walls of institutions of higher education. Public interest groups and state legislatures have joined the debate about the causes of this problem and how to address it. One response has been the growing demand for measurable student learning outcomes as a way to assess teaching and student learning. Every accrediting agency in the United States now includes the adoption of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) as a component for evaluation of an institution. This movement towards the establishment of SLOs has generated great debate in all post-secondary institutions, including the community colleges in California, particularly with regards to the practicality of basing decision-making on the ever-shifting demographics and conditions inherent in a two-year system of programs and courses. Be that as it may, organizations such as the League for Innovation have published documents outlining the basic skills needed in the 21st century. In the League's report, *Learning Outcomes for the 21st Century*, the focus group assembled identified a set of eight core skills (Wilson, 2000, p 15). Among these are:

1. Communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)
2. Computation skills (understanding and applying mathematical concepts and reasoning, analyzing and using numerical data)

3. Critical thinking and problem solving skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, decision making, creative thinking)
4. Information management skills (collecting, analyzing, and organizing information from a variety of sources).

The difficult task facing all institutions in light of the greater demands for accountability is how to determine measurements for these "basic" skills. The danger lies in viewing academic preparation as a set of skills that can be segmented and compartmentalized for the purposes of discrete measurement. Being able to employ the faculties of critical thinking into the acts of computation and written communication requires more than the sum of discrete tasks.

Measures that focus on the demonstration of higher order processes and apply these competencies to communications and computational skills may necessitate more direct, authentic and costly approaches to assessment that, in the final analysis, test the depth of an institution's commitment to basic skills instruction.

As stated in the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates' report *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities:*

> Competencies for entering students cannot be reduced to a mere listing of skills. True academic competence depends upon a set of perceptions and behaviors acquired while preparing for more advanced academic work. Therefore, a description of abilities necessary for success in college must reflect what college educators recognize as the intellectual and practical dispositions of their successful students.

The difficult task facing all institutions in light of the greater demands for accountability is how to determine measurements for these "basic" skills.

The report surveyed faculty in all three segments of public higher education in California as to the "intellectual habits of mind" important for a student's success. Two-thirds or more of the faculty surveyed identified the following as "important to very important" or "somewhat to very essential" in their classes and within their academic discipline:

- exhibit curiosity (80%)
- experiment with new ideas (79%)
- see other points of view (77%)
- challenge their own beliefs (77%)
- engage in intellectual discussions (74%)
- ask provocative questions (73%)
- generate hypotheses (72%)
- exhibit respect for other viewpoints (71%)
- read with awareness of self and others (68%)

It is clear then that two great challenges remain as we attempt to evaluate the "success" of our basic skills students and our efforts to support them. The first is deciding whether to measure "success" in basic skills courses themselves or in the courses for which basic skills courses provide the preparation. The second is how to measure "success." Is successful course completion the measure of success, and if not, how can one provide quantifiable measurements of the "habits of mind" that comprise preparedness for college-level work?

Recommendations

Assessment and placement are vital components in preparing students for college-level work. At the current time, assessment and placement processes at colleges face many challenges, most of them the result of inadequate resources. The efficacy of assessment and placement processes needs to be evaluated to improve these processes and show how they impact student success. It is with these concerns in mind that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges makes the following recommendations:

1. Resources: Adequate resources must be provided to colleges to perform validation of assessment tests and prerequisites. In addition to funding for research staff, this includes support for the process of test validation and establishment of cut scores.
2. Writing Assessment: Appropriate assessment of writing ability needs to be implemented because one of the requirements for college-level study is the ability to communicate effectively in writing. Adequate resources need to be provided to permit such assessment.
3. Technical Assistance: The Academic Senate and the Chancellor's Office should provide technical assistance to colleges whose assessment processes are inadequate according to their own reporting
4. Orientation: High school students who complete language and mathematics requirements for graduation often find themselves placed in pre-college-level work after undergoing assessment at a community college. Colleges can do little to affect the preparation received in high schools. However, they can work to encourage entering students to address their English and mathematics needs right from the start. Orientation should address the importance of basic skills, ESL, and mathematics preparation.
5. Counseling: Adequate counseling resources need to be provided to further encourage under-prepared students to enroll in coursework that will ultimately lead to their success in college-level work.
6. Common Definitions: A clear understanding of "college-level" work needs to be shared among all segments of higher education. The Academic Senate should work with its higher education partners in clarifying what constitutes "college-level" and "pre-collegiate" work and expectations for students entering higher education.
7. Availability of Data: Current MIS data collection concerning assessment and matriculation fails to provide important information for the review of the success of basic skills programs. The Academic Senate should work with the Chancellor's Office to identify additional types of data that need to be collected with regards to basic skills programs and student success in these programs.
8. Assessment Coordination: Urban area colleges in close proximity to one another may consider opening discussions on how to discourage such placement/assessment strategies as "college shopping" and "assessment shopping."

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Appendix A: California Community College Assessment Instruments, 2002-2003, with Headcount

Instrument Description	Headcount
ABAS/ENGLISH	439
ABAS/MCOM (MATH)	431
ACT COMPASS ALGEBRA	20,790
ACT COMPASS COLLEGE ALGEBRA	5,086
ACT COMPASS ESL GRAMMAR USAGE	940
ACT COMPASS ESL LISTENING	943
ACT COMPASS ESL LISTENING, READING and GRAMMAR USAGE	4,646
ACT COMPASS ESL READING	941
ACT COMPASS GEOMETRY	4,099
ACT COMPASS NUMERICAL SKILLS/PRE-ALGEBRA	32,433
ACT COMPASS READING	43,259
ACT COMPASS TRIGONOMETRY	6,826
ACT COMPASS WRITING	39,117
ALGEBRA ASSESSMENT II (FORMS A & B)	948
ALGEBRA READINESS TEST	1,926
APS COMPUTATIONAL	1,434
APS READING	19,722
APS READING FORM A	1,566
APS WRITING	20,572
APS WRITING FORM A	1,566
ASSESSMENT OF WRITTEN ENGLISH (AWE)	13,416
CALIFORNIA CHEMISTRY DIAGNOSTIC TEST	1,541
COLLEGE ALGEBRA	616
COLLEGE ALGEBRA (LOCAL TEST)	509
COLLEGE BASIC SKILLS PLACEMENT TEST (NJCBSPT)	513
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM A COMPUTATION	847
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM A ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	2
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM A READING	12,002
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM A WRITING	16,218
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM B READING	3
COLLEGE BOARD APS FORM B WRITING	955
COLLEGE BOARD CONVENTIONS OF WRITTEN ENG.	6,334
COLLEGE BOARD CPT ARITHMETIC	29,532

COLLEGE BOARD CPT ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	21,022
COLLEGE BOARD CPT READING COMPREHENSION	48,790
COLLEGE BOARD CPT SENTENCE SKILLS	48,714
COLLEGE BOARD DTLS ARITHMETIC	3,714
COLLEGE BOARD DTLS SENTENCE SKILLS	6,332
COLLEGE BOARD DTMS ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	4,094
COLLEGE BOARD DTMS FUNCTIONS & GRAPHS	1,212
COLLEGE BOARD DTMS FUNCTIONS AND GRAPHS	512
COLLEGE BOARD DTMS INTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA	3,146
COLLEGE TEST FOR ENGLISH PLACEMENT	7,953
COLLEGE TESTS FOR ENGLISH PLACEMENT	4,336
COMBINED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS ASSESSMENT (CELSA)	36,222
COMMUNICATIONS/ENGLISH ESSAY	1,390
COMPARATIVE GUIDANCE & PLACEMENT (APPLIED ARITHMETIC)	2,116
COMPREHENSIVE ADULT STUDENT ASSESSMENT (CASAS_IRCA)	280
CPT ARITHMETIC	49,029
CPT COLLEGE LEVEL MATH	12,283
CPT ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	39,379
CPT LEVELS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LOEP) LANGUAGE USE	1,190
CPT LEVELS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LOEP) READING SKILLS	1,327
CPT LEVELS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LOEP) SENTENCE MEANING	407
CPT READING COMPREHENSION	91,583
CPT READING COMPREHENSION (PAPER/PENCIL)	1,841
CPT SENTENCE SKILLS	88,721
CPT SENTENCE SKILLS (PAPER/PENCIL)	1,838
CTEP READING COMPREHENSION	11,874
CTEP READING COMPREHENSION (computerized version)	2,190
CTEP SENTENCE AND SYNTAX SKILLS	21,473
CTEP SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND GRAMMAR	24,546
CTEP SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND GRAMMAR (computerized version)	1,329
DEGREES OF READING POWER (DRP)	4,602
DEGREES OF READING POWER (FOR ESL COURSES)	326
DESCRIPTIVE TEST OF LANGUAGE SKILLS (CRITICAL REASONING)	3,096
DESCRIPTIVE TEST OF LANGUAGE SKILLS (SENTENCE STRUCTURE)	3,099
DESCRIPTIVE TEST OF MATH SKILLS	1,580
DTLS CONVENTIONS OF WRITTEN ENGLISH	3,327
DTLS CRITICAL REASONING	4
DTLS READING COMPREHENSION	54,634

DTLS SENTENCE SKILLS	25,486
DTLS SENTENCE STRUCTURE	3,243
DTLS WRITING	29,532
DTMS ARITHMETIC	8,084
DTMS ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	457
DTMS FUNCTIONS AND GRAPHS	50
ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA	8,387
ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA (LOCAL TEST)	1,797
ENGLISH ESSAY ASSESSMENT	4,308
ENGLISH ESSAY TEST	2,255
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ESSAY	1,761
ENGLISH PLACEMENT	4,867
ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST	7,486
ENGLISH WRITING (LOCAL TEST)	9,923
ENGLISH WRITING SAMPLE	4,695
ESL DIRECT WRITING SAMPLE	27
ESL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ESSAY SAMPLE	2,188
ESL ESSAY	1,152
ESL GRAMMAR/TEST	2,184
ESL GRAMMAR/WRITING TEST	5,008
ESL HOLISTIC WRITING SAMPLE	710
ESL LISTENING/SPEAKING TEST	2,185
ESL PLACEMENT TEST	3,768
ESL WRITING	1,297
ESL WRITING ASSESSMENT	2,033
ESL WRITING PLACEMENT TEST	258
ESL WRITING SAMPLE	6,137
HOLISTIC WRITING SAMPLE (ENGLISH)	2,035
IMTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA	37
INTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA	1,745
INTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA (LOCAL TEST)	1,082
MATH PLACEMENT TEST	270
MATH SKILLS INVENTORY	2
MDTP MATH ANALYSIS READING TEST	324
NELSON-DENNY (FORM G)	3,113
NELSON-DENNY (FORM H)	4,359
NELSON-DENNY READING TEST (FORMS G AND H)	5,446
NUMERICAL SKILLS	22,158

PREALGEBRA (LOCAL TEST)	2,469
READING SKILLS	29,579
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH	209
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	2,162
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LA DISTRICT MODIFIED)	3,222
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LISTENING AND COMPREHENSION)	938
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (READING)	1,915
SECONDARY LEVEL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TEST (SLEP)	531
STANFORD DIAGNOSTIC READING TEST (FORM A)	3,866
UC/CSU MDTP ALGEBRA READINESS (FORMS AR50/86 AND AR50/90)	76,828
UC/CSU MDTP ELEMENTARY ALGEBRA (FORM EA50C86)	49,473
UC/CSU MDTP INTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA (FORMS IA45C86 AND IA45C91)	33,569
UC/CSU MDTP PRE-CALCULUS READINESS (FORMS PC40C86 AND PC60C86)	10,780
UNKNOWN	14,670
WRITING ASSESSMENT	5,653
WRITING SAMPLE (ENGLISH)	5,056
WRITING SAMPLE (ESL)	822
WRITING SAMPLE PLACEMENT (ENGLISH)	695
WRITING SKILLS	26,721
Grand Total	1,348,690

Appendix B: California Community College Matriculation Services Data, 2002-2003

Note: data is for students enrolled in the 2002-2003 year (unduplicated); services may have been offered in any year during which these students were enrolled.

Orientation	Credit	Noncredit
Directed to Orientation	1,504,913	44,776
Exempted from Orientation	930,155	348,546
Received Orientation	1,002,326	26,380
Not Received Orientation	1,414,884	366,870
Refused Orientation	17,858	72
Total Enrolled	2,435,068	393,322

Counseling	Credit	Noncredit
Directed to Counseling Services	1,547,906	45,317
Exempted from Counseling Services	887,162	348,005
Received Student Education Plan (SEP) Counseling During the Year	59,780	275
Received Other Counseling During the Year	223,856	4,365
Received SEP and Other Counseling During the Year	271,992	1,550
Not Received Counseling During the Year	1,909,807	387,700
Refused Counseling During the Year	1,562	0
Total Enrolled	2,435,068	393,322

Placement Assessment Services	Credit	Noncredit
Directed to Assessment Testing	1,547,607	49,238
Exempted from Assessment Testing	887,461	344,084
Participated in Placement Testing Only	837,282	33,424
Participated in Other Measures of Testing Only	93,771	1,634
Received Skills Assessment Services Based on Both of the Above	281,663	1,889
Not Received Placement Testing	1,217,453	356,306
Refused Assessment Placement Services	4,899	68
Total Enrolled	2,435,068	393,322

Appendix C: 2004 Basic Skills Survey

Note: Two colleges submitted two sets of responses.

1. Name
   Total Respondents: 87
   skipped this question: 2
2. Position
   Total Respondents: 87
   skipped this question: 2
3. College
   Total Respondents: 87
   skipped this question: 2

4. What measures are being used to determine student placement into Basic Skills math classes at your college? (Choose all that apply.)

	Response Total
Objective tests (e.g. multiple choice)	80
Evaluative tests (e.g. free-response)	15
Transcripts (high school, other colleges)	61
Demonstrated motivation/persistence	12
Personal interview	28
Personal information	28
Other (please specify)	25
Total Respondents	86
(skipped this question)	3

5. What measures are being used to determine student placement into Basic Skills English classes at your college? (Choose all that apply.)

	Response Total
Objective tests (e.g. multiple choice)	79
Evaluative tests (e.g. essay writing sample)	35
Transcripts (high school, other colleges)	55
Demonstrated motivation/persistence	11
Personal interview	24
Personal information	30
Other (please specify)	26
Total Respondents	89
(skipped this question)	0

6. Which of the following are used to waive placement evaluation into Basic Skills?

	Response Total
AP Test scores	33
TOEFL scores (for international students)	9
High school grades	18
Coursework from other colleges	58
Work experience	5
Instructor-initiated evaluation	9
Instructor recommendation	16
We do not waive placement evaluation into Basic Skills	25
Other (please specify)	19
Total Respondents	87
(skipped this question)	2

7. If you allow waivers for the placement evaluation, who grants the waiver?
   Total Respondents: 59 (open-response)
   Skipped this question: 30
8. For English/ESL placement into Basic Skills, do you require a writing sample?

Yes	35
No	52
Total Respondents	87
(skipped this question)	2

9. If your answer to Question 8 is "no", why not?

No perceived need	7
Too expensive to evaluate	30
Too time-consuming to evaluate	26
Other (please specify)	31
Total Respondents	55
(skipped this question)	34

10. If you answered "yes" to Question 8, how is your writing sample evaluated?

Read by faculty/staff in house	37
Sent out for commercial evaluation	2
Total Respondents	38
(skipped this question)	51

11. How is placement data for math/English used at your college? (Choose all that apply.)

For recommended student placement into classes	60
For mandatory student placement into classes	57
To determine eligibility for financial aid (ability to benefit)	27
To adjust the number of sections of math/English courses	24
To adjust the level of support services available for math/English students	21
Other (please specify)	6
Total Respondents	89
(skipped this question)	0

12. Are in-coming students required to undergo an orientation? (Choose all that apply.)

Yes, for all in-coming students	22
No, but it is strongly recommended to all in-coming students	50
Optional for all in-coming students	12
It depends on how many units they take their initial semester	7
It depends on which classes they take their initial semester	6
Other (please specify)	15
Total Respondents	87
(skipped this question)	2

13. What percentage of students complete orientation online?

We do not offer online orientation	45
1-24%	21
25-49%	8
50-74%	4
75% or more	4
Total Respondents	82
(skipped this question)	7

14. What research have you done to correlate the orientation offered with student success?

	In-person orientation	Online orientation
Institutional	28	6
Departmental	6	1
None so far	45	34
Other	2	3
Total Respondents		79
(skipped this question)		10

15. What support services are available for Basic Skills students? (Choose all that apply.)

Tutoring (in person)	86
Tutoring (online)	29
Learning centers/labs	84
Self-paced computer assisted lessons	64
Mentoring	30
Supplemental instruction (i.e. study groups)	50
Learning communities	45
Paired classes	33
Other (please specify)	11
Total Respondents	88
(skipped this question)	1

16. Do you have a program in place that monitors the success of Basic Skills students in Basic Skills courses?

Yes	34
No	48
Total Respondents	82
(skipped this question)	7

17. If you answered yes to Question 16, could you briefly describe how the program works?
    Total Respondents: 33
    Skipped this question: 56

18. Which of the following would you identify as problems with your current placement/assessment process?

Overly time-consuming for the student	9
Cost	16
Insufficient counseling support	33
Lack of enforcement of placement prerequisites	16
Placements are not accurate	23
Other (please specify)	34
Total Respondents	75
(skipped this question)	14