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BACKGROUND PAPER

RIDING THE STORM OUT:

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION REFORM AS A KEY COMPONENT OF COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION

Bruce Vandal
Vice President, Complete College America

The storm clouds are brewing on the horizon as progress on the Common Core State Standards moves toward its first critical test, the implementation of the Common Core assessments in the spring of 2015. With some suggesting that as few as one third of 11th-graders will be assessed as college ready,[1] advocates for the Common Core and those who are working tirelessly to implement the standards will have to withstand a potential hurricane of reaction from the media and the broader public about the utility of a set of standards that so few students will achieve.

As anyone who lives on a coastline knows, preparing for the storm and heeding warnings — regardless of the storm's predicted path or severity — is the only way to ensure that you come out safe and sound. The first and most significant wave that states will need to withstand is the high percentage of 11th-graders who will not test as college ready in math and English Language Arts. Most will agree that funneling these students into an ineffective developmental education system is not the answer. As a result, practitioners and policymakers must consider new and innovative ways to serve these students effectively and ensure that the results from the assessments don't steer students off course from their postsecondary destinations. Fortunately, recent research and reforms in the world of developmental education are giving both K–12 and higher education leaders all the tools they need to shoulder the inevitable storm that will result when the first set of Common Core assessment results are released.

The Common Core State Standards provide the great promise for many students of either eliminating their need for remedial education or at the very least ensuring that their skill levels are reasonably close to college ready. Currently, as many as 60 percent of community college students are placed into remedial education and are unlikely to ever earn a postsecondary credential. Only about 25 percent of community college students who require remedial education earn a postsecondary credential within eight years. Because of these statistics, it is critical that state education systems take full advantage of the Common Core State Standards to improve remedial education efforts in both K–12 and postsecondary education.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the current remedial education system on most college campuses is the long sequence of remedial courses that many students must navigate before

entering a college-level math course. On some campuses, students can be placed into two, three, or more levels of developmental education in any one subject area. Students placed in the lowest levels of remedial education rarely ever enroll in and pass college-level courses in math or English; the Community College Research Center found that only about 10 percent of students who are placed three levels below college math ever proceed to and pass college-level math.[2] Consequently, efforts to improve the college readiness of students involve not only eliminating the need for remediation for many students but also closing the large learning gap that necessitates long remedial education sequences at postsecondary institutions.

The Common Core State Standards provide a unique opening for K–12 and higher education institutions to work together to ensure that high school students are better prepared for postsecondary education. The college and career readiness assessments will provide educators the opportunities to intervene with students while still in high school to maximize the likelihood that students will be college ready. The assessments can also open the door to a more nuanced assessment system that considers a variety of variables that can help predict student success in college-level courses. In addition, the standards provide a platform for collaborative work to create clear curricular pathways so students can enter their programs of choice.

To assist states with their preparations for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the assessments, I offer the following suggestions on how to meet the needs of students who are assessed below college ready.

1. IMPLEMENT EARLY ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES.

One of the essential objectives of the Common Core State Standards college and career readiness assessments being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced consortia is having a clear understanding of whether students are ready for college course work by the end of 11th grade. While the assessments won't provide specific feedback to students and teachers on precise deficiencies, there will be an opportunity for students who are assessed below college ready to spend the 12th grade working to achieve the college readiness standard by high school graduation. And although the new assessments will not be online until 2015, there is no reason that high schools and colleges cannot work together now to implement this strategy.

Many states have already set a course on how to go about it. California's Early Assessment Program (EAP)[3] adds test items to the state's 11th-grade assessment that measure college readiness according to California State University standards. Florida's Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT)[4] is a statewide placement test that is aligned with the Common Core State Standards and the state's K–12 standards. The assessment is provided in 11th grade and provides students an opportunity to learn if they are prepared for college work. In these two states, interventions have been designed in both math and writing that allow students to address their remedial education needs while in high school. For those who are close to college ready in California, students who pass the approved preparation course are deemed college ready. The same is true in Florida, with the added benefit of allowing students to enroll in college-level courses in math or English concurrently with their high school enrollment in math or English.

While the California and Florida systems are clearly sophisticated, there is no reason that states can't employ an early assessment and early intervention model in a cost-effective manner. For example, states can deliver college placement exams, like ACCUPLACER®, to high school students. For those students who test below the current college-ready scores on those exams, high schools and postsecondary institutions could collaborate to either construct high school

transition courses to address student academic deficiencies or make college developmental education courses available to high school students. Better yet, high schools and colleges could offer yearlong versions of gateway college courses that would fulfill requirements at state colleges and universities. The senior year should be viewed as an on-ramp into college programs, particularly for students who are college ready or just short of college ready, enabling them to begin their college experience in earnest before they graduate from high school.

Another example of a successful model is the Math Plus program in Massachusetts. This pilot initiative is being implemented by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, working with Worcester State University, the Massachusetts federal GEAR UP program, and the College Board. The pilot program is conducting a randomized experiment where high school students who are placed below college level on ACCUPLACER are enrolled in an intensive, learning-outcome-based program aligned to Worcester State's elementary algebra developmental education course. Early results have been very promising, with 50 percent of students who participate in the programs being deemed "college ready" compared to 0 percent of the control group who did not receive the intervention.

A promising resource that K–12 and postsecondary institutions can use is the newly redesigned ACCUPLACER assessment that is aligned with the MyFoundationsLab products developed by Pearson. Delivering the new diagnostic assessment embedded in ACCUPLACER allows high schools and colleges to pinpoint the skills that students need to address in order to be college ready. Once skill deficiencies are identified, students can use the ACCUPLACER®// MyFoundationsLab® technology-based products to receive customized instruction in those particular areas. ACCUPLACER//MyFoundationsLab products have been successfully implemented at many colleges as part of their developmental education programs, and more colleges are beginning to work with high schools to implement these strategies.

Chattanooga State Community College (Chattanooga State) in Tennessee boasts one of the nation's best developmental education programs. The college has redesigned all of its developmental education and its gateway college math courses by making use of the MyMathLab product. Students use computer labs to work individually on a set of math modules, allowing students to move as deliberately or quickly as necessary to learn the content. Chattanooga State has now implemented this approach in local high schools with great results.

The Chattanooga State approach is promising because it allows the college to extend its own developmental education reform to local high schools. The result is a more aligned system that facilitates effective transitions for high school students. Implementing an early assessment and intervention strategy now will build a critical piece of infrastructure that will need to be in place eventually once the Common Core Standards are implemented. More important, it provides a key opportunity to better prepare students right away, inform long-term implementation of the standards, and build sustainable partnerships between K–12 and higher education.

2. INCORPORATE MULTIPLE MEASURES, INCLUDING HIGH SCHOOL GPA, INTO ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT PRACTICES.

Recent research from the Community College Research Center has found that reliance on a single assessment for placement into remedial education is not an effective way to determine college readiness.[5] The research found that relying on a single assessment, taken at one point in time, to make high-stakes decisions that could result in a student being placed into multiple semesters of developmental education creates the distinct possibility that many students who could be successful in college-level courses will be placed into remedial education courses and consequently may not make it to college-level courses.

Nevertheless, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia are each developing a single assessment to determine college and career readiness in their member states. While there is reason to believe that these assessments will be aligned with the content that postsecondary institutions expect for college entrance, and that they will be more sophisticated than the existing placement tests used by colleges, they still will not precisely diagnose the level of remediation a student might need. We also know that there are other factors that come into play when determining whether a student is ready for college-level work. Noncognitive variables like study habits, perseverance, and ability to be successful in a learning environment all come into play and are not captured by a single placement exam that only measures academic skills.

Research has found that using a combination of a college placement exam score and high school grade point average is a far stronger method for placing students into remedial courses or college-level courses. High school GPA, while not necessarily an accurate measure of student competency in the skills required for college readiness, is a reasonably strong proxy for the noncognitive variables that also contribute to student success. The logic is that if a student has a high GPA from high school, he or she knows how to be successful in a learning environment. Because high school GPA is a cumulative measure of many years of school work, it provides a valuable complement to assessments that are taken at one point in time.

Thus, colleges should be encouraged to incorporate high school GPA in their placement decisions. A more precise placement process will have an immediate impact on the percentage of students placed into developmental education and will also be a more accurate measure of the level of remediation students will require.

As far as the Common Core State Standards are concerned, it only makes sense that students who perform well in Common Core–aligned courses and earn a high GPA will be more likely to be successful in college-level courses. If GPA is combined with the results of a student's college readiness assessment, it is reasonable to conclude that colleges will be better able to more effectively place students. For those students who have strong high school GPAs but achieved just below the college-ready standard on the college and career readiness exam, it is feasible to place them into college-level work based on multiple years of strong high school work, rather than relying on a single assessment taken at one point at time.

3. PROVIDE STUDENT SUPPORTS TO FACILITATE SMOOTH TRANSITIONS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION.

Another advantage of using multiple assessment tools for student placement is that the results can provide students valuable insight about the academic programs they might consider when they enter postsecondary education. With concern that the Common Core State Standards' singular college readiness standard might send the wrong message to many students about their ability to be successful at college, it is important that support systems be put in place to advise students about their options. Creating a more comprehensive assessment system can cue valuable advising and support for students that can provide critical guidance on the academic programs they should consider, the institutions that they might attend, and the preparation they need during their senior year.

Support systems aligned to postsecondary readiness during the senior year can assist students who are either unclear of their academic goals or possess goals that may not be optimally aligned with their level of academic preparation. Using student performance on the college and career readiness assessment and other measures, such as a tool that measures academic and career interests, can inform students' choice of a postsecondary program of study.

The Completion by Design initiative, which is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, works with community colleges in several states to provide early and intensive academic support to students to ensure successful matriculation into postsecondary education.[6]

Completion by Design uses a student success framework focused on preventing student attrition and creating student momentum through the system. It implements a set of interventions and supports that connect students to academic programs, facilitate their entry into those programs, track progress, and promote completion.[7] High schools and postsecondary education institutions can use assessments and early advising to align students' academic strengths and professional goals, beginning in high school, with a program of study.

4. USE THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS TO DEVELOP CLEAR CURRICULAR PATHWAYS FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE GATEWAY COURSES, PARTICULARLY IN MATHEMATICS.

While the Common Core State Standards culminate in a single measure of college readiness for math and English Language Arts, it is increasingly clear that the precise skills that students need for their preferred program of study may differ from the Common Core college readiness standard. This is particularly the case in mathematics, where, depending on whether a student is pursuing a STEM, social science, or arts/humanities degree, students may require different math skills. Clearly, while STEM students will need a strong algebra background, social science students may require a stronger background in statistics. Likewise, students who are pursuing an art or humanities degree may only need to have basic quantitative literacy.

High schools and colleges should work together immediately to identify the curricular pathways required for various programs of study. Many higher education institutions are beginning this work through initiatives like Statway at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching[8] and Mathways at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin.[9] These initiatives are working with colleges to clearly identify the academic competencies that students need for each curricular pathway.

There is no shortcut for this work. Faculty from high schools and colleges must spend the time to work together to set up these curricular pathways. The temptation may be for states to set different cut scores on the college and career readiness assessment to determine placement into a math course aligned with a student's preferred program of study. This is not a solution. First and foremost, the college readiness exam cut score will be designed for optimal college readiness; it is not intended to be diagnostic and, as a result, there will not be logical cut scores that will be aligned to different curricular pathways. States will need to use additional measures to assess readiness for different curricular pathways. Recently developed ACCUPLACER or other diagnostic assessments might provide more precise measures of readiness for each curricular pathway. Likewise, high school courses that teach to the college readiness standard but also incorporate the different skills required for each curricular pathway should be developed. For example, a course in statistics that is aligned with Common Core could be a useful addition to many high school course offerings.

Many might think that these diversified pathways are contrary to the entire premise of the Common Core State Standards. This is not true. A singular Common Core college readiness standard in math, largely based on algebra competency, is viewed as optimal preparation for any postsecondary program. Yet, it should not be construed that a student who doesn't meet the college readiness standard is not ready for any college-level work at all. It is important for high schools to use the Common Core State Standards and the college and career readiness

standards as a beacon to drive instruction in content that will provide students an opportunity to pursue any possible program of study. We should not assume that students who do not meet the standard cannot do college-ready work.

5. OFFER REMEDIAL COURSE WORK AS A COREQUISITE, NOT A PREREQUISITE.

If it is indeed the case that the new college readiness standard and assessment will result in a high percentage of students being assessed below that standard, it will not be an acceptable option to place those students into the existing failed remedial education system where students must complete one, two, or more remedial courses before accessing college-level courses. With research showing that taking even one remedial education course significantly reduces a student's likelihood of passing a gateway course, colleges should make every effort to enroll as many students as possible into college-level courses and provide them remedial support alongside the college-level course as a corequisite. With models like the Community College of Baltimore County's Accelerated Learning Program[10] (ALP) and Austin Peay State University's Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) program[11] showing that a corequisite approach results in significantly higher pass rates in gateway courses than a traditional prerequisite approach for remediation, colleges should proceed with all deliberate speed to implement corequisite courses. Implementing corequisite remedial courses today will fully prepare colleges for the potential onslaught of students who score below college ready on the college and career readiness assessment.

As the college and career readiness assessments move toward implementation, it is critical that high schools and colleges together develop the strategies that will be used to serve the high percentage of students who will not meet the college readiness standards. The assumption should be that low college readiness rates do not necessarily mean high remediation rates. States should move today to implement all of the above strategies to ensure that very few students are placed in remedial courses as we currently know them. Instead, many students should participate in early intervention strategies, only take the content they need to be successful in their program of study, and if they need remediation, receive it alongside college-level courses. Finally, states should not put all their eggs in the college readiness assessment basket. High school GPA and diagnostic assessments should be implemented to provide more precise placements for students. By taking these steps today, education systems will be fully prepared for the potential storm that might occur with the results of the first round of readiness assessments.

NOTES

1. *A First Look at the Common Core and College and Career Readiness*, ACT, 2010, http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/FirstLook.pdf.

2. Thomas Bailey, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung Woo Cho, "Student Progression Through Developmental Sequences at Community Colleges," CCRC Research Brief No. 45 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, September 2010).

3. Early Assessment Program, California Department of Education, State Board of Education, and California State University, http://www.calstate.edu/eap/.

4. Florida Postsecondary Education Readiness Test, Florida Division of State Colleges, http://www.fldoe.org/cc/pert.asp.

5. Judith Scott-Clayton, "Do High-Stakes Placement Exams Predict College Success?" (CCRC Working Paper No. 41). (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, February 2012), http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1026.

6. Completion by Design, http://completionbydesign.org/.

7. Completion by Design Student Success Framework, http://completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/cdat_loss&momentum_r101.pdf.

8. Statway, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/statway/.

9. Mathways, Charles A. Dana Center, The University of Texas at Austin, http://www.utdanacenter.org/mathways/index.php.

10. Accelerated Learning Program, The Community College of Baltimore County, http://alp-deved.org/.

11. Structured Learning Assistance Program, Austin Peay State University, http://www.apsu.edu/academic-support-center/sla/about.

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