CAPR | CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS

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Early Findings from a National Survey of Developmental Education Practices

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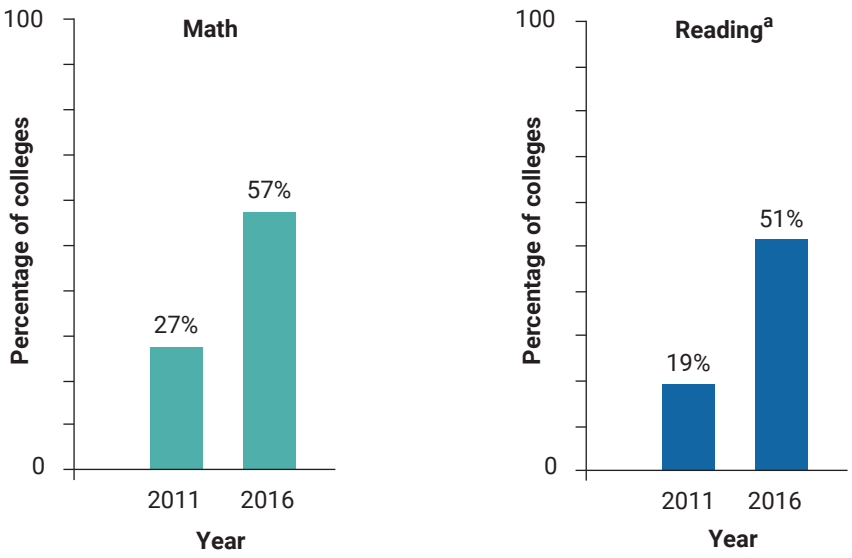
Judged to be academically underprepared, millions of students must take developmental education in college, and more than half never make it through or graduate.[1] Experts argue that there are two main problems: Too many students are being placed unnecessarily into developmental courses, and the structure and traditional instructional practices in developmental education can pose barriers to student success.[2] Educators are developing and implementing many innovations to address these issues, but little is known about the breadth and scale of reforms across the country.[3] The Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), a partnership between MDRC and the Community College Research Center, is conducting research to examine these issues. This brief presents early findings from CAPR's nationally representative survey of nearly 1,000 open-access and nonselective postsecondary institutions.

Increasing Use of Multiple Measures to Assess College Readiness

Traditionally, the majority of public two-year and four-year colleges have relied solely on standardized tests to assess students' college readiness in math and English language skills. Numerous studies, however, have questioned the validity of this approach, noting that up to one-third of students placed in developmental education on the basis of standardized test results

FIGURE 1. Use of Measures Other Than Standardized Tests for Assessment Among Public Two-Year Colleges



SOURCES: 2011 data: Fields and Parsad (2012); 2016 data: CAPR institutional survey.

NOTE: [a]The Fields and Parsad (2012) reading statistics are for reading placement only, whereas the CAPR survey data are for both reading and writing. Because many colleges are combining reading and writing courses, the CAPR survey grouped them together.

would have been successful in college-level classes, and that other indicators of college readiness, such as high school performance, provide a more accurate measure of college success.[4]

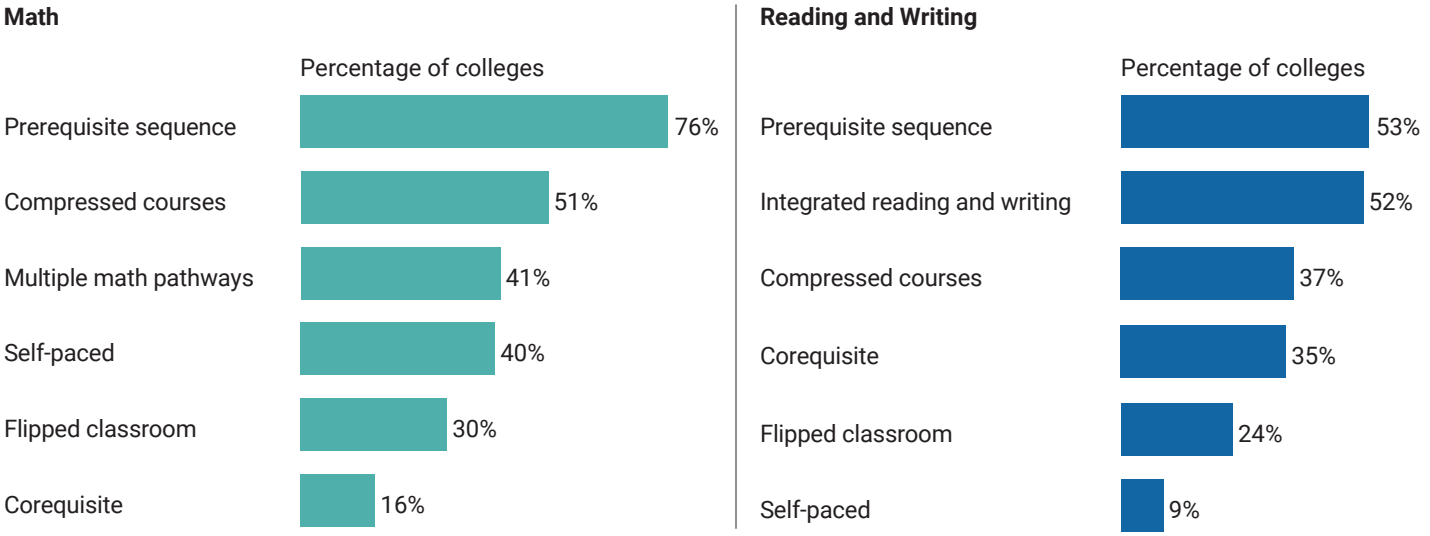
This argument has gained traction in recent years among public two-year institutions. In a 2011 survey, all public two-year institutions reported using a standardized mathematics test to place students into college-level math courses; as shown in Figure 1, only 27 percent reported using at least one other criterion, such as high school grade point average or other high school outcomes.[5] Just five years later, 57 percent of public two-year institutions reported using multiple measures for math placement. The trend is also evident in reading placement. In 2011, 94 percent of public two-year institutions reported using a standardized test for college-level placement in reading, and only 19 percent reported using at least one other criterion.[6] In 2016, 51 percent reported using multiple measures for reading and writing placement.

The two surveys show that four-year institutions are seeing similar growth in the use of multiple measures to assess college readiness. Several states, moreover, are pushing colleges toward wholesale adoption of assessment practices that use multiple measures.[7] Yet questions remain about what types of measures best predict students' success in college-level courses. To help answer these questions, CAPR is conducting a large-scale, multisite randomized controlled trial in partnership with the State University of New York to evaluate the effectiveness of using multiple measures.

Innovation in Instructional Offerings

Among institutions that offer developmental education, a large proportion of public two-year colleges still rely on a traditional multisemester prerequisite sequence of developmental courses. CAPR's survey data show that about 76 percent of public two-year colleges offering developmental education use the traditional sequence for at least three math sections, and 53 percent do so for reading and writing. Figure 2, however, shows that many public two-year

FIGURE 2. Prevalence of Developmental Education Instructional Methods Among Public Two-Year Colleges



SOURCE: CAPR institutional survey.

NOTES: Values represent percentages among two-year public colleges that reported offering developmental courses. Colleges were counted as using an instructional method if they used it in more than two course sections. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Multiple math pathways are sets of linked courses designed to give students math skills relevant to their degree requirements and program of study. Self-paced courses allow students to work through course content independently. In the flipped classroom model, students are exposed to content outside of class, often through online materials, while most in-class time is devoted to activities, projects, and discussions. Corequisite courses involve students taking a college-level course concurrently with a developmental course that serves as a learning support. Integrated reading and writing courses are English courses in which reading and writing skills are taught together.

colleges are moving beyond the traditional approach and are experimenting with different instructional reforms in two or more course sections. Over half the colleges surveyed have implemented compressed courses in math, in which a traditional semester-long course is shortened into a multiweek or half-semester course. And just over half the colleges had integrated developmental reading and writing courses into one streamlined course. Colleges are also trying approaches such as multiple math pathways, self-paced learning models, flipped classrooms, and corequisite remediation.

These results indicate that many of the developmental reform strategies that have been promoted in the last five years, such as math pathways models from the **Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching** and the **Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin**, and the **Community College of Baltimore County's Accelerated Learning Project** corequisite model, have gained traction with a substantial proportion of two-year colleges. As with new college readiness assessment practices, the field would benefit from more rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of alternative instructional strategies. CAPR is also conducting a multisite randomized controlled trial of the Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways model in Texas to inform the field about the effectiveness of this math pathways approach.

What's Ahead

Postsecondary institutions in the United States face considerable challenges to improving graduation rates, particularly for students assigned to developmental education. While there is much innovation, important questions remain about the breadth of institutional practices across the country, which states or systems are enacting them on a large scale, and which new reforms show promise. Moreover, little is known about the factors driving institutions to adopt new reforms. A full report on the survey results for both two-year and four-year institutions will dig more deeply into these questions, supplemented by findings from qualitative interviews. Reports about the impact of new reforms in CAPR's **other major studies** will be posted in 2018 and available at **postsecondaryreadiness.org**.

Notes

1. Adelman (2004); Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010).
2. Belfield and Crosta (2012); Scott-Clayton (2012); Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010).
3. Zachry Rutschow and Schneider (2011); Kalamkarian, Raufman, and Edgecombe (2015); Barnett and Reddy (2017).
4. Scott-Clayton (2012); Belfield and Crosta (2012).
5. Fields and Parsad (2012).
6. Fields and Parsad (2012).
7. Barnett and Reddy (2017).

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