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Alternative to Placement Tests Allows More Community College Students to Take and Pass College-Level Math and English

Multiple Measures Placement Uses High School GPA, Placement Test Results, Other Data to Decide if Students Need Remediation

New York, September 20, 2018 — Because postsecondary institutions often rely on a single standardized placement test to determine students' college readiness, many incoming community college students who would have succeeded in entry-level college courses are instead placed in remedial courses. That leaves them less likely to graduate and more likely to take on debt.

Colleges are looking for new, more accurate ways to place students into the appropriate courses—and a solution may be in sight.

According to early results from a study of 13,000 students at seven State University of New York community colleges, if colleges use a broader set of measures to place students, they can boost enrollment in college-level courses—and students have proven they can keep up. Researchers from the [Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness](#) (CAPR) found that when schools used multiple measures to place students, assignment to college-level courses jumped by 5 percentage points in math and more than 30 percentage points in English. What is more, students placed using multiple measures were more likely to pass a college-level English or math course in their first term than comparison students.

The new report—[Multiple Measures Placement Using Data Analytics: An Implementation and Early Impacts Report](#)—is available on the CAPR website.

“While still early, these findings indicate that an algorithm combining multiple measures more accurately predicts success in college-level courses than a single test, and will allow more students to take and pass college-level math and English early in college,” said Elisabeth Barnett, the lead researcher on [the project](#). “We will know more about longer term outcomes at the end of the study, but at the very least, we know that multiple measures placement can spare many students from taking courses they don’t need.”

Rather than relying exclusively on standardized tests, the schools in the study used a predictive algorithm that took into account multiple factors, including high school GPA and years since high school graduation, to determine whether incoming students would have to take remedial math or English. Past research has shown that when schools rely exclusively on standardized tests to measure college readiness, large percentages of learners are placed into developmental courses when they could succeed in college-level courses. As a result, students' degree progress is needlessly stalled while they are forced to sink time and money into classes that do not help them earn credits toward graduation. Federal data indicate that two thirds of community college students and 40 percent of students at four-year public colleges take at least one remedial course during college, so misplacement potentially affects hundreds of thousands of students.

The full results of the study by CAPR, a research center led by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, and MDRC, a social policy research organization, will be published in 2019. The study follows students who started between fall 2016 and fall 2017 at Cayuga Community College (Auburn, NY), Jefferson Community College (Watertown, NY), Niagara County Community College (Sanborn, NY), Onondaga Community College (Syracuse, NY), Rockland Community College (Suffern, NY), Schenectady County Community College (Schenectady, NY), and Westchester Community College (Valhalla, NY).

Early results from the study's first cohort of 4,729 students:

- In math, 14 percent of students placed higher than they would have as a result of multiple measures assessment; 7 percent placed lower.
- In English, 41.5 percent of students placed higher than they would have as a result of multiple measures assessment; 6.5 percent placed lower.
- Students placed using multiple measures were more likely to enroll in and pass a college-level course in their first term: 3.1 percentage points in math and 12.5 percentage points in English.
- Women appeared to benefit more from the multiple measures assessment than men in college-level math course placement, enrollment, and completion.
- Black and Hispanic students appeared to benefit more than White students from multiple measures assessment in English course placement and enrollment but not completion.

The Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR) is a partnership of research scholars led by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, and MDRC that researches innovative practices in developmental education across the United States. It is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C140007 to Teachers College, Columbia University.