# Trends in Community College Assessment and Placement Approaches: Implications for Educational Policy[1]

Dolores Perin and Kerry Charron
DP111@columbia.edu
Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University

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*Abstract*. *A qualitative, instrumental case study was conducted to examine students' academic preparedness, and assessment and placement policy in fifteen community colleges across the country. Selected findings reported in this paper are: large proportions of incoming students are poorly prepared for postsecondary reading, writing and math; similar academic needs are found among developmental education students and those with limited English language proficiency; there are discrepancies between state and institutional policy for skills testing and developmental education placement; and in some cases institutions are bypassing their own stated assessment and placement policy.*

Postsecondary education is rapidly becoming a requirement for labor market entry and advancement in the United States (Goldin, 2001). Community colleges provide an entry point to higher education for large numbers of first-generation college students, new immigrants, returning adult students, and recent high school graduates whose low income or poor academic record rule out enrollment in four-year institutions. Serving a heterogeneous population engenders the need to devise effective ways to teach academically underprepared students. Although completion of secondary education is required for entry to community college degree programs, many entering students lack the reading, writing or math skills needed to learn subject-matter at the postsecondary level (Grubb et al., 1999; Perin et al., 2003). In response to this difficulty, virtually all publicly-funded community colleges offer developmental education (remedial) courses (NCES, 1996; Shults, 2000) intended to prepare students for the college curriculum. Usually, these courses do not bear credit applicable to the degree.

The role of community colleges in educating non-native speakers of English, especially Spanish speakers, is particularly important. Community colleges showed an 84% increase in Hispanic enrollments between 1986 and 1996 compared to an increase of 24% for African-Americans and 21% across all ethnic groups (AACC, undated). Approximately 40% of 18-24 year old Latino higher education students enroll in community colleges, compared to 25% of whites and African-Americans in the same age group (Fry, 2002). Since limited English language proficiency is associated with academic difficulty (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Mokharti & Sheorey, 2002) the increasing numbers of non-native English speakers implies an added need for developmental education services.

Placement in developmental education comes about from an assessment of entering students' abilities. However, although most community colleges mandate basic skills assessment for all

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entering freshmen, many institutions do not require that low-scoring students actually attend developmental education classes (McCabe, 2000). Consequently, students who "test into" remediation may nonetheless enroll in college-level classes. Assuming that developmental education does in fact boost reading, writing and math skills, the refusal of low scorers to participate in remediation would appear to threaten their performance in degree programs.

Although basic skills assessment and remediation are well-entrenched features of higher education (Boylan et al., 1997; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; McCabe, 2000), there are few in-depth, multi-institution studies of assessment and placement policies in the literature. As part of the National Field Study (NFS) of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University (CCRC Currents, 2003), we investigated policies and practices for remediation in community colleges. The study defines remediation as instructional activities designed to bring reading, writing and math ability to postsecondary level, and is concerned with three instructional formats: developmental education, the use of academic learning centers, and modification of college-level curricula to accommodate poor academic skills. In the current paper, we report selected findings concerning students' academic preparedness, and policy for basic skills assessment and developmental education placement at the NFS institutions (information about other papers on the study of remediation will be available at www.tc.columbia.edu/ccrc).

This paper addresses the following questions:

*Academic preparedness*: How well prepared are entering students at the NFS sites for the academic demands of postsecondary study? What is the relation between English language proficiency and academic preparation at these sites?

*State and institutional policy for assessment and placement*: Do the NFS states mandate assessment and placement for entering students? What policies are in effect at the NFS sites for assessment and placement? What issues are arising in these colleges when implementing these policies?

## Method

### *Educational setting*

The National Field Study (NFS) was a multiple-topic, qualitative case study conducted at 15 community colleges in six states. As shown in Table 1, the sample consisted of five urban, five suburban, one mixed (urban and suburban), and four rural community colleges in which enrollment ranged from 1,854 to 28,862, with 5% to 96% minority participation. Enrollment data were taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, www.ed.gov/ipeds), except where indicated. The sites were recruited based on location, size, urbanicity, and hospitality to the project. All site names are fictitious. Besides remediation, other NFS topics include accountability, distance learning, counseling, and high school-college connections. Each study was conducted by a different project leader.

Table 1. NFS Sites: State, Location, Size and Ethnic Composition

| College | State | Location | Fall 2000 Enrollment | % Minority |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Northwest Suburban CC (NWSCC) | WA | Suburban | 11,234 | 30% |
| Northwest Rural CC (NWRCC) | WA | Rural | 1,854 | 25% |
| Western Urban CC (WUCC) | CA | Urban | 14,406* | 61% |
| Western Suburban CC (WSCC) | CA | Suburban | 13,233 | 35% |
| Western Rural CC (WRCC) | CA | Rural | 4,344 | 59% |
| Southwest Urban CC (SWUCC) | TX | Urban | 25,735 | 35% |
| Southwest Suburban CC (SWSCC) | TX | Suburban | 12,996 | 25% |
| Midwest Suburban CC (MWSCC) | IL | Suburban | 28,862 | 27% |
| Midwest Urban CC (MWUCC) | IL | Urban | 8,147 | 81% |
| Midwest Rural CC (MWRCC) | IL | Rural | 7,675 | 10% |
| Southern Urban CC (SUCC) | FL | Urban | 27,565 | 42% |
| Southern Mixed CC (SMCC) | FL | Mixed | 13,186 | 20% |
| Northeast Urban CC (NEUCC) | NY | Urban | 6,928 | 96% |
| Northeast Suburban CC (NESCC) | NY | Suburban | 9,304 | 12% |
| Northeast Rural CC (NERCC) | NY | Rural | 4,521 | 5% |

*District data, not IPEDS

*Instrumentation*

A comprehensive interview protocol that listed questions for all the NFS topics was developed jointly by the various NFS project leaders. Questions were tailored for four different community college roles: administrator, faculty, counselor and student.

The remediation project was an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) that adopted an orientational approach (Patton, 1990) on the premise that basic academic skills instruction for degree-seeking students was essential to the community college mission (Boylan et al., 1997; Howard & Obetz, 1996; McCabe, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Consequently, the interview questions on this topic were designed to elucidate policies and practices relating to academic preparation (Patton, 1990, p. 87). The questions were based on previous work including Boylan et al. (1997), Grubb et al. (1999); Ignash (1997), McCabe (2000), McCabe and Day (1998), Perin (2001), Richardson and Elliot (1994), Roueche and Roueche (1999), Shults (2000), Spann (2000), and Zeitlin and Marcus (1996).

*Data collection procedure*

Each site was visited for three to five days by a team of senior researchers and research assistants who conducted semi-structured interviews with approximately 25 administrators, instructors, counselors and students. Within each college, respondents were identified by a college contact familiar with the purpose of the study, followed by snowball, or chain sampling (Patton, 1990) in which interviewed participants nominated others who could provide important information. Most interviews were conducted individually, and some in small groups. Confidentiality was promised for all sites and personnel.

A total of 314 interviews were conducted. Interview information was supplemented by document review and classroom observation. Documents included institutional and state reports, course outlines, textbooks and student work samples. The types and amount of college material were uneven across sites and states. The main source of data for this study was a set of 201 interview transcripts (64% of the total) that, according to an initial key word search, contained information about students' academic skills and developmental education.

*Data analysis*

The transcripts were analyzed using QSR-N5 software (www.qsrinternational.com; previously known as NUD*IST). The data analysis began with open coding in N5 free nodes, moving to axial coding once saturation was achieved (Evensen et al., 2001). A set of 92 N5 tree nodes were initially applied to the data. In a second pass, we reduced the number of codes to 12 (all codes available from the first author.) When the coding was complete, an N5 coding report was produced for each of the 12 codes. The first author read and summarized these reports based on the study questions. The summaries consisted of paraphrasing of salient information with references permitting the tracing back of any point to its source in a transcript, and verbatim statements selected for use in eventual reporting.

## Findings

*Academic preparedness*

All sites reported academic skill deficiencies among a proportion of students. As shown in Table 2, nine of the fifteen sites reported that at least 50% of students required remediation.

Table 2. Students' Academic Preparedness

| Site | Students with Poor Academic Skills |
|---|---|
| NWSCC | 60% enter with low skills |
| NWRCC | 91% of incoming students need developmental math, 52% need developmental English |
| WUCC | 60% enter with poor skills, much demand for higher level developmental math |
| WSCC | Specific proportion not known but poor skills among many entering students described |
| WRCC | Specific proportion not reported but increase in low skills described |
| SWUCC | Specific proportion not reported but low skills among many entering students described |
| SWSCC | 44% of incoming students need developmental math, 25% need reading, 15% need writing |
| MWUCC | 85% need developmental math, 81% need writing, 51% need reading, |
| MWSCC | Proportion not reported but low skills among many entering students described |
| MWRCC | 64% of incoming students need developmental math, 33% need developmental English |
| SUCC | 85% of incoming students need at least one developmental education course |
| SMCC | 51% of incoming students need developmental math, 36% need reading, 26% need writing |
| NEUCC | 90% test into at least one developmental education course |
| NESCC | 70% of students enter with poor skills; 25% entering freshman composition not ready |
| NERCC | Specific proportion not reported, 90% come from lowest third of high school class |

Entrants' skills were reported to be decreasing at 11 sites, and interviewees at two sites thought their colleges were beginning to recruit students of lower skill levels. However, the skills of entrants were described as improving at another two colleges, which was attributed to better high school preparation. At yet another two institutions, skills had remained stable, and there had even been slight improvement in math preparedness of entrants at one of them.

Some interviewees thought that a significant number of students in developmental education courses had learning disabilities.

In some cases, students were entering with middle-school level skills at best.

> … we're getting students who had been through twelve years of school who can't write, who have problems with basic math, who are reading on sometimes a sixth and seventh grade level. (Administrator, NWSCC)

Discipline-area instructors expressed frustration at low skill levels.

> *Nursing 1*: ... we talk about documenting on legal documents, and they still write like this. So you're having to proof everything they write, before you let them put it in a chart... Because I'd like to not have to go to court with them.
> *Radiology Technology*: That's why somebody's got to be held accountable, which would go back to the [name of English course]instructor and say: Hey, how did this happen?
> *Nursing 2*: I think know how it happens. Because writing is about process and I care about product... I think one of the things that we have to do is come up with standards for college level work and until a student is prepared for that, that they cannot take college level work because what happens, they take [freshman English]. Same thing. I get students that -- when I evaluate [them] they have a B or an A in [freshman English]. They get into my class, I give them a paper to do, and they don't have a clue how to write a paper, how to defend what they've written, supportive arguments, and I find it very frustrating.
> *Nursing 1*: They can't critically think, they can't do the problems, they can't figure out what they need out of the question.
> *Radiology Technology*: So my question always is: How do they get a B in these pre-requisites? And then what we try to do is go to the English Department and say, the students comes out of your course and they have a B. What does that mean? And they can't they tell us.
> *Nursing 1*: They can't tell you because they would give the grade for if they can write a two order sentence at the beginning, and at the end they write a six order sentence, then they get an A... again, you use the word "dumbing down" right, because the [freshman English] teachers, I guess they have one of two choices. They can either have a certain standard and wind up flunking half the class if they don't meet it. Because those people are nowhere near prepared to where they should be. So it's a matter of opinion. Somewhere in the grade schools, they're going to have to up the standards, so that when they get to college, that we can actually start teaching at the right level. (NWSCC, Academic Faculty group interview)

> Sometimes students showed large discrepancies between different skill areas:
>
> You are reading at a 10th grade level, you're writing at a 4th grade level. College is all about writing. (Administrator, MWUCC).

Although as indicated above, math preparedness had improved at one site, this skill was reported as the most problematic area at many other sites. At SMCC, an instructor stated that some students did not realize that they were unable to perform the math needed for physics and chemistry courses. At NERCC, the repetition of remedial math courses used up financial aid allocations:

> They can't afford to repeat the class. And sometimes students literally need to take [name of remedial math class] three times to get it. If they have difficulties [with math] reasoning, they're not going to get the elementary algebra the first time through, and so our hearts burn for these students (Developmental Education Faculty, NERCC)

Some faculty felt that it was impractical for students with poor math skills to attempt college study.

> *Faculty 1*: The calculator doesn't do everything. And maybe some of them can't reason without the calculator. But, you know, they, they put the problems in backwards and they'll get the right answer but they don't know it. It's really, it's very pathetic.
> *Faculty 2*: Definitely there's way too much emphasis on calculators in the high schools. If these guys cannot multiply seven times eight...without a calculator, they have no business being in college. (Developmental Education Faculty group interview, MWUCC)

Although there was some sign, as noted above, that secondary education was effective, much more common were claims that high schools were not preparing students adequately for college.

> …there (needs to be) a better match between what the high schools and doing and what the colleges are doing and what colleges expect. But that's probably a long shot. (Administrator, SWUCC)

It was stated that recent high school graduates had not studied grammar since middle school, and had had no math in the last two years of high school. Some interviewees questioned whether some high school graduates were really college quality. An interviewee at NERCC reported that 90% of entering students had graduated in the lower third of their high school class. Therefore, two thirds of high school graduates were going elsewhere, some no longer participating in education but others to baccalaureate-awarding institutions and proprietary trade schools.

Some recent high school graduates were described as unmotivated but also shocked to be told they were not ready for college credit courses. This lack of awareness may result from combination of social promotion at the high school and a tendency of academically low-performing students not to be good judges of their own abilities (El-Hindi, 1997). At SMCC, a

developmental education instructor indicated that some students in chemistry and physics courses did not realize that they lacked the math skills necessary for these subjects.

SWSCC described an ongoing project in which the college and local high schools gave dual credit for the same courses, which was resulting in better prepared community college entrants. On the other hand, NESCC described a failed initiative in which the college had attempted to administer placement tests and provide academic tutoring at a high school. According to an administrator at NESCC, the high school could not provide a "reliable testing environment," and was unwilling to have the testing done at the community college. Further, when the college offered to send community college tutors to the high school, the high school "could not find the hours." NESCC also considered distance learning as a means of building high school students' academic preparedness but, according to the administrator interviewed, "these aren't the type of students who do well with distance learning environments so we just haven't found the right formula yet."

Age was connected with academic preparedness. Younger students were described as sometimes lacking motivation, in contrast to the older, returning adults. Some of the returning students at NERCC previously held factory jobs and did not show the capability for abstract thinking required in some of the college-level classroom, although other older students were better skilled and only needed "brush up."

In addition to academic skills difficulties, students had multiple social problems, including criminal and drug histories and mental illness. Problems of poverty, single parenthood, and welfare involvement were described.

*Connections between academic preparedness and English language proficiency*. Non-native speakers of English were well represented and/ or their numbers were growing at several sites (NWSCC, WSCC, SWUCC, MWUCC, MWSCC, SMCC, and NEUCC). NWSCC had recently added two positions to accommodate this new population. WSCC offered some linked courses (ESL paired with content courses). At this site, attrition rates in the nursing program were higher for non-native than native English speakers. At WSCC, half of the non-native speakers of English were international students, the other half immigrants.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and developmental education students were described as overlapping populations at some sites. LEP students at NEUCC had severe academic deficiencies, some spending two and a half years taking every level of ESL before taking developmental English. An interviewee at NWSCC indicated that it was hard to tell the difference between LEP and developmental students in the middle range.

> More recently what we're finding, at least in my experience, the distinction between native and non-native speakers is blurring in the middle. I taught a middle level [developmental education] class last year that really illustrated this beautifully. It was about one-third international students and one-third native speakers, and one-third students who fall into that middle area where they've been born here from non-native parents, that their spoken English is quite fluent. They are accepted as native speakers by the native speakers as non-native speakers by the non-native speakers and there's a

> continuum, a spectrum of needs that can be taught together. It was remarkable, everybody got along really well together. And it's harder and harder to separate and say this group is non-native speaker and this one isn't. I had some students in another block class complain that there were native speakers and non-native speakers in the class. The two of them complained vociferously. Each found out later that they were talking about each other. (Developmental Education Faculty, NWSCC)

LEP students at NEUCC were held to learn at a different rate from native English speakers. However, at SWUCC, LEP students mainly needed grammar instruction while their ability to write essays was good. An instructor at SMCC described difficulties that LEP students had in transferring grammar skills to essay writing.

A very large number of languages were spoken but Spanish strongly predominated. At MWSCC, the population of native Spanish-speakers was described as "exploding" and at NEUCC, 57% were Latino/ a. A counselor at this institution described the challenges experienced by some native Spanish speakers.

> In a largely Hispanic community you have the Spanish language newspaper, Spanish language broadcasting, Spanish doctors, everybody. Your parents are speaking that language. Grandma and Grandfather are speaking the language... [t]he Dominican population specifically... because flights are so cheap, routinely go back to the Dominican Republic. They may live here. They may have been born here, but they have plenty of family and cousins and so forth there, so they stay bilingual. They are bilingual and you know, for language acquisition and to be really fluent in the language, you almost have to not speak, you have to forget a little bit. To be fluent you have to think in your language. And our students do a lot of translating from Spanish into English, and the thing that slows them down is that fact... Also when they come to college, then they have to adjust to this culture here. Unlike native American students, our ESL students really have to make a lot of adjustments. There are a lot of demands when you come to college. It's very difficult for them. Not so many of them graduate. However, with my work here as a counselor, I have seen a lot of students, who do beat the odds. (Counselor, NEUCC)

*State and institutional policy for assessment and placement*

As shown in Table 3, three states, Texas, Illinois and Florida, mandated both assessment and placement although Illinois left specific procedures to the colleges. Texas and Florida mandated the specific test to be used for assessment, and also placed limits on the number of remedial courses students could take using financial aid. New York mandated both assessment and placement in only one of its two state systems. In the other New York State system, as in the state of California, only assessment was mandated, leaving the community colleges to determine their own placement policy. The state of Washington mandated neither assessment nor placement.

Table 3. State and Institutional Policy for Assessment and Placement in Developmental Education

| | State Policy | | | | Institutional Policy | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| State | Mandatory assessment only | Mandatory testing and placement | No mandates | Have developed state tests | Comments on policy | Site-specific policy |
| WA** | | | X | | | NWSCC: students encouraged to take assessment, voluntary placement<br>NWRCC: mandatory assessment, mandatory placement in math, voluntary placement in reading and writing |
| CA* | X | | | | | WSCC: mandatory self-assessment, voluntary placement<br>WUCC: mandatory assessment, voluntary placement<br>WRCC: mandatory assessment and placement |
| TX** | | X | | X | State limit on number of remedial courses | SWUCC: mandatory assessment and placement<br>SWSCC: mandatory assessment and placement |
| IL** | | X | | | State leaves specific procedures to college | MWSCC - mandatory assessment, mandatory placement for reading, voluntary for writing and math.<br>MWUCC - mandatory assessment and placement<br>MWRCC - mandatory assessment, mandatory placement (math only) |
| FL* | | X | | X | State limit of 3 remedial courses | SUCC: mandatory assessment and placement<br>SMCC: mandatory assessment and placement |
| NY*** | X (state system) | X (municipal system) | | | | NERCC - mandatory assessment, voluntary placement<br>NESCC - mandatory assessment, voluntary placement<br>NWRCC - mandatory assessment and placement |

* State permits remediation only in community colleges

** State permits remediation at both community and four-year colleges

*** NY/ Municipal system: community and comprehensive colleges only; NY/ state system: community and four-year colleges

As can be seen in Table 4, institutional policy did not always match state policy. Three colleges (NWSCC, NWRCC and WRCC) exceeded the state mandate. NWSCC and NWRCC are both in Washington, which mandated neither assessment nor placement. NWSCC strongly encouraged assessment, amounting to an institutional mandate, and NWRCC mandated assessment as well as math placement. WRCC, in California, mandated both assessment and placement whereas the state mandated only assessment.

Table 4. Match between state and college policy

| Site | State | State mandates assessment only | College mandates assessment only | State mandates assessment & placement | College mandates assessment & placement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NWSCC | WA | | Yes (encouraged) | | |
| NWRCC | WA | | Yes | | Yes (math placement) |
| WUCC | CA | Yes | Yes | | |
| WSCC | CA | Yes | Yes (self-assessment) | | |
| WRCC | CA | Yes | | | Yes |
| SWUCC | TX | | | Yes | Yes |
| SWSCC | TX | | | Yes | Yes |
| MWUCC | IL | | | Yes | Yes |
| MWSCC | IL | | | Yes | Yes (reading) |
| MWRCC | IL | | | Yes | Yes |
| SUCC | FL | | | Yes | Yes |
| SMCC | FL | | | Yes | Yes |
| NEUCC | NY** | | | Yes | Yes |
| NESCC | NY* | Yes | Yes | | |
| NERCC | NY* | Yes | Yes | | |

* State system.
** Municipal system

*Institutional assessment and placement procedures.*

As with most community colleges across the country, all the NFS sites had a two-stage assessment process for incoming students. First, students could be declared exempt from placement testing based on prior standardized scores such as the SAT, or other criteria. Exempted students proceeded to the college curriculum. Second, students who were not exempt took a placement test (or, in the case of WSCC, completed a self-assessment questionnaire). The results of this assessment determined whether students were ready for college-level courses or needed developmental education.

Some interviewees expressed concerns that the assessment tests were not related to the college curriculum, for example:

> If I could speak as a history teacher, even though we have mandatory reading tests I feel that the level of those reading tests is too low. Because I'll have students in my class who have passed the reading test, who can, actually read the words of things that I've assigned, but they have no way to interpret them. For example, I assigned Voltaire's Candide, which is, you know, the bulk of the class found funny and there were some

> students in the class that simply didn't understand that it was all irony. You know, they, they kind of understood what the story was but they didn't understand the meaning at all. Because their reading level was too low. And they actually passed the reading test which is sophomore and high school, I think is the standard. I don't know what that means, but... (Academic Faculty, MWSCC)

Institutional placement policy determines whether low-scoring students must attend designated developmental education courses. Specific information about institutional policies for each NFS site is provided in Table 5. It will be seen below that neither state nor institutional policy was strictly followed in all cases. Further, in some cases, assessment and placement policy were only applicable to students who wished to matriculate in degree programs, and sometimes within these, in academic rather than occupational areas.

One difficulty with leaving assessment and remedial participation to the discretion of the student was a "trial and error" process at the beginning of each semester where students found that they were in the wrong level and had to move to new classes.

> [at the] very beginning of college level of math courses the drop rate is so high and it's because these are the students that still can't do it. They didn't have to take our assessment test, so no one even suggested take a remedial course first, to brush up. So students sometimes put themselves back within the first week "I'm over my head. Can I get into your class." This goes on the first week of classes a lot. (Developmental Education Faculty, SWSCC)

Table 5: Site-specific details of institutional assessment and placement policy

| Site | Mandatory assessment | Mandatory placement |
|---|---|---|
| NWSCC | Yes (encouraged) | No but many courses have remedial prerequisites, including college composition, and other courses set college composition as a prerequisite. |
| NWRCC | Yes. | Yes (math only). |
| WUCC | Yes, locally-developed test. Previously used Accuplacer, discontinued because problems. | Yes. Students can appeal placement, college stipulates four possible grounds for appeal. |
| WSCC | Yes: self-assessment, no test | No. Some programs stipulate requirements e.g. nursing 2.5 GPA. No remedial prerequisites on any courses. ESL students required to take at least 12 units ESL first semester. |
| WRCC | Yes. | Yes. |
| SWUCC | Yes. Two standardized tests in use for placement, one a State test and the other a commercially available measure (COMPASS). Same tests for exit from remediation. Complicated policy. If fail parts of State test must take compass. If pass remedial writing and earn B in college composition, exempt from exit test. If earn B in highest level remedial also exempt from exit test. | Yes. Better scorers can take some college classes simultaneously, including some paired courses. If drop remedial classes must also drop credit classes. Very few credit classes do not have remedial prerequisites. If student refuses to take remedial class, not allowed to take credit classes. Student can take exit test during semester. |
| SWSCC | Yes. State mandate that anyone who fails any part of the state test needs remediation. Only reading and math tested, not writing. Exemption from state test if student earns B or better in certain designated courses. If student has passed state test but has not had math in the last 3 years must take college math assessment test. Locally-developed writing test at end of writing remediation and ESL, students can skip levels based on score. | Yes. If test into more than one remedial area, only required to take one, advised to take both. If math selected, must complete whole sequence. Attendance monitored, if student not attending remediation, withdrawn from all courses. |
| MWUCC | Yes. COMPASS for placement and move to higher level, also locally-developed tests for exit from remediation. Student must pass both course and exit test to move to next level. | Yes. If reading score at or below 7$^{th}$ grade placed in pre-credit program. Any one remedial course can be repeated only twice. |
| MWSCC | Yes for reading only; writing and math tests required only when student plans to enroll in credit English or math. COMPASS supplemented by locally-developed writing sample. | Yes for reading and math, writing expected soon. If fail reading must meet with advisor, get card signing promise to register for reading class, if no card, not allowed to register for credit classes. Students can avoid remediation until the end, "zigzag" through curriculum, many delay until have taken 8 credits. |
| MWRCC | Yes | Yes (math only) |
| SUCC | Yes. State mandate but college can decide own cutoffs. Exemption from testing possible based on SAT scores. CPT test. | Yes. Developmental teachers determine whether student ready for next level. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| SMCC | Yes. Some exemptions using SAT and ACT scores. Exit tests administered by instructors when they feel students ready. Assessment only for degree students, and vocational students pursuing certain technical specializations. | Yes. If test into developmental education, must attend 2 hours/ week learning lab along with credit classes. |
| NEUCC | Yes. ACT measure recently adopted. | Yes. Students allowed to take some introductory college level courses simultaneously with developmental courses. |
| NESCC | Yes. ASSET test. | No unless test weak in all three areas. Students who test weak in all three required to take remedial course in one area of their choosing. Others not mandated but strongly encouraged by advisors, must sign waiver if opt not to take remedial class. Advisors add 2 noncredit hours of learning center to schedule. Passing both remedial class test and standardized exit exam required to go to next level of remediation or enter college English. Students can take credit and remedial courses simultaneously, most do. |
| NERCC | Yes. COMPASS test | No. |

*Stated policy vs. de facto policy for remedial placement within institutions*

An examination of institutional practices revealed discrepancies between stated policy and actual practices ("de facto policy") concerning placement in developmental education. In one type of discrepancy, the institutional policy was for voluntary placement, while de facto policy mandated placement. The other type of discrepancy was the reverse such that stated institutional policy mandated placement while de facto placement policy permitted voluntary placement.

*Example 1*: stated policy voluntary, de facto policy mandatory. Even if placement is not mandatory in principle, it will be mandatory in practice if most college-credit courses have remedial or college English prerequisites. Any college in which college English is required for graduation, and has a remedial prerequisite has a de facto mandatory placement policy. Although courses that do not have a college English prerequisite tend not to transfer to baccalaureate institutions, NESCC added courses that do not have the English prerequisite because of students' low skill levels.

*Example 2*: stated policy mandatory, de facto policy voluntary. It was shown in Tables 3 and 4 that four institutions (WUCC, WSCC, NESCC and NERCC) mandated assessment only, and nine institutions mandated placement (NWRCC, WRCC, SWUCC, SWSCC, MWSCC, MWRCC, SUCC, SMCC and NEUCC). Loopholes in both assessment and placement policy were found at ten of the sites (NWSCC, WUCC, WRCC, SWUCC, SWSCC, MWSCC, MWRCC, SUCC, SMCC, and NERCC). Examples are as follows:

A standardized exit test in the writing area could be replaced by a passing grade in remedial writing and a grade of B in college composition, meaning that a subjective measure replaced an objective measure (SWSCC). A faculty member sympathetically described severe anxiety one student experienced:

> What happened was she took [remedial math], she took [name of state standardized assessment test], she didn't pass it, she went into college algebra. She then has to make a B or better in college algebra, or if she makes a B or better she never has to take [the state test] again... But if she doesn't and she made a C, she said she just barely, she almost made a B but she made a C and she said, "So now I have to take [the test] again. I'm going to have to go to a psychologist so that I can take it." Because, you know, what I wanted to almost tell her, but there were other people around me, "If I see you again," this is what we need to talk about but, "you are so fearful of this test that it doesn't matter if it's one plus one plus one, you probably put three just because you are so afraid of it, of that test"… And I think that she's so anxious over it. So… she worked, worked, worked, but it doesn't stick with, what she's probably doing is memorizing herself through the courses you know but some people you can't… She's a good student. That's the hard part is these students that are [in remedial] math can be total honor students in everything else. I mean it's so hard on them emotionally to be in this developmental class when they excel at everything else. (Developmental Education Faculty, SWSCC)

At the same institution, an administrator thought too much remediation was being provided:

> We're tired, I mean, we're tired of the amount of remedial education that we're doing. (Administrator, SWSCC)

Course instructors could override a standardized test score with a score on a class test. At MWSCC, math instructors rarely did so but English faculty were more lenient. A developmental education instructor at SMCC described how a judgment was made. As with the SWSCC example above, the instructor was sensitive to the students' test anxiety.

> We have a little flexibility. I mean you have to use your own judgment. Somebody that's been making forties the entire term, and they fail that exam with a forty, I'm not going to give them a retake. Somebody that's been making eighties the entire time, you know they've been coming to class the entire time, but they are very nervous every time. I would give them a retake. Because I would feel like it was test anxiety and it was the pressure. So it's really a judgment call. Somebody that's the C borderline kid, I would probably give him the benefit of the doubt. Say okay here let's try it. We'll give you one more chance. If you don't make it this is it. And some of them do, some of them don't. (Developmental Education Faculty, SMCC)

At MWSCC, where placement in writing remediation was voluntary, students tended to ignore advice based on a standardized test, but were more likely to follow recommendations based on a writing sample.

MWUCC did not strictly enforce developmental education placement.

> The problem is we can not shut the door because the students will have nothing to take for a while. There are some skills in 101 courses that are necessary for the rest of our courses. I can see the trend, the slow raising--a result of the assessment is the slow raising of standards. There is a whole pool of students who are not going to meet these

> requirements. So what happens to those students? They are caught in this vast wasteland… (Academic Faculty, MWUCC)

Similarly, MWRCC did not enforce English prerequisites, making remediation less necessary.

At two institutions that mandated both assessment and placement (SUCC and SMCC), students were not required to take the assessment test if they declared that they were not seeking a degree, and were permitted to take courses without satisfying prerequisites. NESCC had removed remedial prerequisites from some college-credit courses.

Developmental education waivers were issued to students that SUCC could not serve because of high demand. With the waivers, students could take courses such as psychology and US government. However, the college had difficulty finding courses without prerequisites that could be taken using the waivers.

> … what we've had in the past is real higher demand for the [developmental education] courses than classes offered. So then we get waivers. And in the English area, that was particularly detrimental because mostly it meant that people couldn't read the textbooks of the courses they were in because their reading level wasn't up. So we're trying to get a lot better at projecting the numbers needed and making sure that we provide classes and looking out for other alternatives besides waivers. Because a waiver basically said - well you should be in [a remedial class] but since we don't have a [remedial] class to offer you, go ahead and take US Government, or go ahead and take psychology. And then very often it's a recipe for failure. So we're working on precision scheduling where we do a much better job offering a number of classes needed and not canceling classes at the last minute. That's pretty much it. So it is a mandate system, but we didn't always make that work well as an institution. (Developmental Education Faculty, SUCC)

Also at SUCC, motivated students were allowed to exit from a developmental level even when they lacked skills, on the basis that they have been working hard (SUCC). At another institution (SWUCC) it was impossible for motivated students to fail a remedial class.

Students were creative in bypassing placement policy. In the past, students were "outsmarting" the prerequisite system by registering online rather than in person, but the computer registration system was amended to enforce policy on prerequisites (SUCC). At WRCC, students regularly bypassed mandatory placement policy with online registration, and the college computer system did not prevent students who did not have prerequisites from registering. At this institution, students were blocked only with in-person registration (WRCC). At SMCC, developmental education students were required to register in person with a counselor. At NWSCC, students could bypass remedial prerequisites for a college composition course by taking and passing the course at another institution where there is no remedial prerequisite, and transferring the course to the current institution. At WUCC, students could override their placement scores by telling counselors they had taken the course at another institution; in this case, the student's verbal report was accepted.

State limits on developmental education affecting SWUCC, SWSCC, SUCC, and SMCC may create a press to move students forward irrespective of skills: if the college wants to keep the student, he or she must be able to take college-level courses. However, an administrator at SUCC strongly felt that financial aid was not related to student performance:

> The students that [the state limitations] affect aren't here long enough for them to be significant… the kind of student who will need to repeat a remedial course four times is never going to complete the remedial program. Ever. And never going to attempt it. I mean, they just disappear. That's the great tragedy of our work… The idea is that you would pick up the cost of your own education. If you want to keep failing, it's okay. You have to pay for it yourself. It's an idiotic policy. As though people were failing out of economic motive. And that's stupid. Nobody came to class planning to fail and gyp the state out of its money… And charging them more doesn't make them better students, doesn't remediate them poor preparation they receive, it doesn't remediate their language disability. (Administrator, SUCC)

Remediation was not required at NERCC even if the assessment test score was low. A student could sign a waiver at registration and decline the recommendation of an advisor. An academic instructor at NERCC expressed a preference for remedial prerequisites:

> We get a lot of students who come into this course before they have done or [are] doing remedial reading. And that's a big problem because they cannot read the textbook. So they cannot understand what in the heck we're talking about, and it really puts them at a disadvantage. And they were put in there just to kind of fill the slots. And we have been saying this to [a college administrator], we've got to have remediation first. They're not ready for this. I mean this is only going to help. Speak up and say it. (Academic Faculty, NERCC)

## Brief Discussion

The study found that many students are arriving at community colleges underprepared for postsecondary study. All the study sites provide assessment services and provide developmental education courses. In general, the institutional decision to mandate assessment and/ or remedial placement is predictable from state policy, although several institutions have decided to require assessment or placement despite the lack of state directive to do so. Among the sites that mandated remedial placement, discrepancies were found between stated institutional policy and de facto policy. In some cases these discrepancies can be characterized as flexibility to help the student and in other cases they appear to amount to loopholes.

Why is remediation not universally required as a prerequisite for registration in college-credit courses? Student preference is one reason: it is understandable that learners would eschew remedial courses that do not confer degree credit, especially if they are of the skill-and-drill variety and not connected to life goals (Grubb et al., 1999). Although conclusive answers are beyond the scope of this qualitative case study, one hypothesis is that enrollments are threatened when remediation is mandated. At MWSCC and WSCC interviewees speculated that attrition from developmental education courses was as high as 50%. Remedial dropout was also a

problem at NESCC, where developmental math class scheduling was changed to mornings, considered "top learning time." An administrator at SMCC described labor-intensive measures taken to increase retention in developmental education, including an attendance monitoring system, not allowing developmental education students to register online or by phone, and the installation of new computer software for use in developmental education instruction. These examples suggest that there is tension between an institutional need to maintain enrollments and students' need for basic skills instruction. In a report in preparation we compare the use of academic learning centers to developmental education for increasing student preparedness for the postsecondary curriculum.

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