The conflict between data and perception in placement reform and acceleration of English coursework

by

Corbyn Marie Wild

B.A., California State University, San Bernardino 2012
M.A., California State University, San Bernardino 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2022

Abstract

This work studied an institution's experiences with acceleration and placement reform in English coursework as changes in these measures affected student persistence, completion, and subject mastery in English composition. Through assessing student learning outcomes after placement reform and acceleration, this study compared students' success through institutional data with the perceptions of their success among faculty and counselors. Perceptions were gathered through a Likert-scale survey coupled with thematically coded open-ended questions that reveal an innate desire for increased agency in the implementation of new initiatives. For practitioners, this study provides further insight into placement reform and the acceleration of English in a real-world context with suggestions for increased engagement from faculty and staff when implementing new initiatives. Ultimately, this study found far reaching implications for practice that include consistently gauging the perception of faculty and counselors, transparently clarifying processes and data, establishing a best-practice assessment plan, and developing a shared understanding of student success.

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Co-Major Professor   Co-Major Professor
Dr. Elisabeth Barnett   Dr. Cindy Miles

Abstract

This work studied an institution's experiences with acceleration and placement reform in English coursework as changes in these measures affected student persistence, completion, and subject mastery in English composition. Through assessing student learning outcomes after placement reform and acceleration, this study compared students' success through institutional data with the perceptions of their success among faculty and counselors. Perceptions were gathered through a Likert-scale survey coupled with thematically coded open-ended questions that reveal an innate desire for increased agency in the implementation of new initiatives. For practitioners, this study provides further insight into placement reform and the acceleration of English in a real-world context with suggestions for increased engagement from faculty and staff when implementing new initiatives. Ultimately, this study found far reaching implications for practice that include consistently gauging the perception of faculty and counselors, transparently clarifying processes and data, establishing a best-practice assessment plan, and developing a shared understanding of student success.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In the first course in Composition and Rhetoric, a professor stood behind the podium and began to explain the history of the field we were about to devote our lives to. They started with a story about Harvard University, a beginning that, at first, seemed like a strange way to intimidate us, given we were at a largely unknown state school. However, as they began to explain the roots of our field—tied to the largely socially, racially, and economically biased entrance exams and endless remedial courses that served as a gatekeeping device to prevent the wrong type of student gracing Harvard's hallowed halls—it became clear that this was not a lecture to discourage us, but rather to inspire us to be better. At that moment, I vowed to be a gate-opener rather than a gatekeeper and make the world of English studies available to as many students as possible.

I had thought that I was doing a good job of realizing this goal as a community college English instructor. Sure, I taught some basic skills courses, but the students needed those because they were so far behind. Yes, I relied heavily on placement exam scores to determine which students required noncredit remedial courses, but I was certainly not as bad as Harvard! It was not until the word "acceleration," the condensing of college-level course pathways, started to be bandied around campus that I truly saw the similarities between most community colleges' placement and remediation systems and the Harvard model, which originated modern composition studies. The same socioeconomically challenged students from non-White backgrounds were being disproportionately harmed by systems that were unable to gauge their aptitude for reading and writing truly.

Statement of the Problem

While ideas of acceleration and placement testing reform are not remarkably new for the community colleges of the United States, they are gaining traction quickly as the equity and completion crises caused in part by established placement methods are highlighted (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2015). Because the conversation on acceleration and placement reform is gaining steam nationwide, a multitude of ideas exist on the optimal process for implementing changes in remediation, placement testing, and advising; such a process should facilitate student learning and success while maintaining equitable circumstances that do not disproportionately stall the educational pursuits of students of color or low-income students (Jaggars et al., 2015).

Furthermore, theories undergirding acceleration and placement reform suggest that student persistence and graduation rates increase when students are placed more appropriately and not forced to take remedial coursework (Hern, 2012). However, faculty has a general attitude that, while persistence and graduation are increasing, mastery of subject material is declining (Almy, 2017; Prihandoko, 2018; Smith, 2020). Furthermore, despite a nationwide emphasis on student learning outcomes as a measure of subject mastery, little research has explored student learning outcomes as a measure of acceleration and placement success. Even less has explored faculty perceptions of these changes.

Background of the Problem

Since *Remedial Education: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere* was published by Complete College America in 2012, it has become clear that the traditional methods of placing students in English coursework and endless remedial coursework are national problems for higher education. Indeed, students of color and low-income students were stymied in their progress toward a degree because of outmoded notions of how best to place and educate them in

reading and writing (Vandal, 2019). In response to this issue, many groups have undertaken a movement toward accelerating English pathways that minimize the number of remedial courses a student could be required to take while also examining and reforming placement testing (Vandal, 2019). Ultimately, it was found that requiring more remedial coursework did not encourage persistence or graduation (Vandal, 2019). Students placed in lower-level English courses were more likely than students placed in transferable classes to drop out of college altogether than complete their intended program of study (Hern, 2012).

With Florida, Connecticut, Texas, and California all recently passing legislation that limits how students can be placed into remedial coursework, it seems inevitable that other states will soon follow suit. Because an entity often mandates acceleration and placement reform outside of the institution, much criticism surrounds subject mastery; that is, the achievement of course-level student learning outcomes. Yes, students will graduate sooner if not forced to take remedial coursework, but there is pronounced skepticism about whether students in accelerated coursework will master key student learning outcomes (Prihandoko, 2018; Smith, 2020). Some analyses of assessment data have countered such skepticism, but a pervasive attitude remains among faculty that acceleration and placement reform sacrifice the quality of education in English (Almy, 2017). Further, few studies have examined the attitudes of faculty and counselors involved in this work. This gap in understanding leaves the opportunity to dismiss acceleration and placement reform strategies based on personal perception rather than concrete evidence due to the seeming power of anecdotal evidence to supersede evidence to the contrary.

Purpose of the Study

This research is designed to study an institution's experiences with acceleration and placement reform in English coursework. First, persistence and completion rates were studied

through institutional data, and subject mastery in English composition was explored through the assessment of student learning outcomes. Next, this study aims to compare the actual success of students as reflected in institutional data with the perceptions of their success among faculty and counselors gathered through a survey. Finally, this study hoped to provide some insight into the disparate points of view surrounding acceleration and placement reform in English; that is, potential increases in persistence and completion accompanied by a widespread sense of loss in subject-level mastery. Because few previous studies exist on subject-level mastery and acceleration, this study serves as a starting point for further research in this area.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What acceleration and placement reform strategies in English were implemented at the institution from Fall 2014 to Spring 2020?

RQ2: In what ways did student persistence and completion change during this time?

RQ3: In what ways did student learning outcome mastery in English change during this time?

RQ4: What are the faculty and counselor perceptions of the influence of acceleration and placement reform in English on student persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

RQ5: How do these perceptions compare to actual rates of persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Conflict theory in education is the idea that school systems can be agents of inequality and inequity, and serve to inhibit the social progress of students rather than enhance it (Lumen Learning, n.d.). While some educators may argue that students need to be remediated for them to succeed, conflict theorists contend that placement leads to "self-fulfilling prophecies in which

students live up (or down) to teacher and societal expectations" (Lumen Learning, n.d.). As the dominant group decides what an entering and potentially disadvantaged group may access in education, they inadvertently place students on a path where they must work harder and longer to achieve the same rewards as their more advantaged counterparts.

Conflict theory does not exist in direct tension with functionalism; that is, the idea that educational standards must be met in strict rigor to be meaningful (Curl & Lesnick, 2017). Instead, conflict theory is a means of recognizing barriers in existing systems and finding ways to dismantle the mechanisms that prevent the advancement of disadvantaged and exploited students. Those interested in increasing equity in education often begin as conflict theorists since only through recognizing the traditional systemic barriers and gatekeeping devices can they be dismantled for the benefit of students (Curl & Lesnick, 2017).

For the purposes of this study, conflict theory stands as the foundation on which acceleration and placement reform find their footing. Without recognizing the biased systems these strategies attempt to rectify, they would not exist. Indeed, this study was undertaken in the spirit of an equitable and meaningful education.

Methodology

An instrumental case study using institutional data, interviews, outcome assessment data, surveys, and document analysis is the method that was used for this study. A case study provides the opportunity to holistically analyze a specific institution as it implements acceleration and placement reform (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This methodology allows for specificity in studying the impact of acceleration and placement reform strategies on student persistence, retention, and success through institutional data. Furthermore, student learning outcome assessment data will provide insights into the mastery of subject material. Through a survey,

faculty and counselor perceptions of acceleration and placement reform strategies were

determined and compared against actual rates of persistence, completion, and subject mastery.

For this study, the site in question is not of particular interest. It is typical of most

community colleges undergoing acceleration and placement reform in English; instead, this

study is primarily preoccupied with determining other areas of study (Creswell & Plano Clark,

2017). In terms of data analysis, this study will use a convergent analytical structure that is both

separative and iterative (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). Three unique streams of data were

analyzed individually and comparatively to determine answers to the aforementioned research

questions. These streams will include quantitative institutional data on persistence, retention,

completion, and subject-level mastery; both qualitative and quantitative data on faculty

perceptions; and comparative data generated by analyzing the aforementioned data in tandem.

Significance of the Study

While placement reform and acceleration are currently a hot topic in the national

discussion surrounding the improvement of student success, there is documented concern from

faculty members that these changes are leaving subject mastery by the wayside. However, no

formal studies have explored how changes in placements and course sequencing affect the

attainment of student learning outcomes, a gap which this study intended to fill. Furthermore, no

studies have identified the perceptions of faculty and counselors engaged in conducting the work

of placement reform and acceleration. This represents another significant gap in scholarship as

the perspectives of those directly involved in this work may meaningfully influence its outcomes.

For practitioners, this study aims to provide additional insight into placement reform and

acceleration of English in a real-world context. Furthermore, this study cataloged the perceptions

of those directly involved with the implementation of placement reform and acceleration to create cohesion between all stakeholders.

Definition of Terms

Acceleration: an evidence-based approach to education that argues taking more courses at lower levels does not contribute to student success nor mastery of subject material, typically achieved through the compression of remedial coursework into one level below transfer or the complete elimination of remedial coursework (Hern, 2012). Practically, acceleration necessitates the removing of remedial courses.

Conflict theory of education: the idea that education systems can inadvertently reinforce harmful class systems and prevent access to the means to improves one's socioeconomic position (Lumen Learning, n.d.).

Counselors: for the purposes of this study, counselors refer to advisors that are directly involved with placing students in English coursework.

Developmental or remedial education: designed to increase the academic skills of underprepared college students through nontransferable instruction, counseling, advising, and tutoring (National Center for Developmental Education, n.d.).

English composition: the study of writing in the English language; a nationally required course typically taken by college freshmen.

Equity in education: the assurance that every student has fair access to educational resources.

Faculty: for the purposes of this study, faculty will refer to instructors directly involved with teaching English composition

Multiple measures placement: the use of at least two or more criteria separate from standardized testing to assess students' readiness for college coursework and make course placement decisions (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

Placement: the means of determining appropriate coursework for students. Traditionally, this would be done through an examination, but recent reform has shifted to the use of multiple measures.

Placement Reform: refers to the use of measures other than standardized testing to recommend coursework to incoming students. This often includes guided self-placement, advising, use of high school GPA, or other non-test based means of assessment for college readiness.

Non-transferable coursework: classes not applicable to general education requirements at four-year institutions.

Transferable coursework: classes applicable to general education requirements at four-year institutions.

Chapter Summary

The impact of faculty and counselor perceptions of acceleration and placement reform is an area requiring further study. This chapter provided an overview of the study, including the problem that was addressed as well as the purpose and significance of the study. Acceleration was introduced as the framework that acts as the catalyst for the changes implemented at the institution. Finally, this chapter provided operational definitions for key terminology used throughout the study.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remainder of the dissertation was organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides a detailed literature review of acceleration and placement reform. Chapter 3 presents the research

methodology utilized for the study. Chapter 4 details the research findings. Finally, Chapter 5

concludes the study with a discussion of the findings, implications of the study, and

recommendations for researchers.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter provides an overarching review of the historical roots of developmental education and placement testing in community colleges, the acceleration and placement reform movement, the criticisms of said movement, measures of student success in the community college, and the role of faculty and counselors in the remediation system. Research was drawn from a variety of peer-reviewed journals, studies in education, books, and current articles in higher education–focused publications.

Beginning with a brief history of the developmental education and placement systems in typical community colleges, this researcher examines the roots of a system that is now under heavy scrutiny. Next, the acceleration and placement reform movement is explored as a means of increasing student success in English coursework along with criticisms of this system. In this study, persistence, retention, completion, and student learning outcome assessment are the primary indicators of student success and are delineated for their meanings as measures of success. Because faculty and counselor perceptions are a key part of the guiding RQs, a brief exploration of the impact of perception on reform rounds out this chapter.

Origins of Developmental Education and Placement Testing in Community Colleges

Understanding acceleration and placement reform must begin with contextualizing the system that necessitated their conception. Developmental or remedial education—that is, coursework not for college credit designed to remediate underprepared students—is almost as old as the education system itself (Lundell & Higbee, 2002). To an extent, it is the need for space to remediate and offer additional learning opportunities to underprivileged populations that spurred the growth of the community college system (Stahl, 2000). However, developmental education in the United States is as old as Harvard, our first university (Boylan et al., 1988).

Boylan et al. (1988) further noted that it was at Harvard that students were given placement exams that ascertained their prior knowledge and coursework was suggested based on the results. Those deemed deficient in skills were regulated to remediated coursework or had their admittance revoked (Boylan et al., 1988).

Historically, the placement and remediation systems in community colleges do not differ much from those initiated by Harvard (Boylan et al., 1988). Students entering a college would be given a placement exam and, based on the results, they would be allowed into college-level coursework or required to take remediated coursework to build their skills (Stahl, 2000). While the community college system was kinder than Harvard University with an open-access policy, the majority of students still began their college careers in remedial coursework based on their placement results (Boylan et al., 1988). Some scholars have argued that the community college or junior college system was created for the purpose of remediating underprepared students such that they might have higher chances of succeeding in 4-year universities (National Center for Developmental Education). What all scholars agree on is that from the beginning, community colleges were inherently linked to developmental education as a means of addressing gaps in knowledge and skills that were primarily felt by students of color (Boylan et al., 1988, Lundell & Highbee, 2002; National Center for Developmental Education, n.d.).

Remedial education and rigorous placement testing became further emphasized as students of color and students from historically undereducated backgrounds began to enter academia (Boylan et al., 1988). These students had not had access to quality education and were deemed unready for the rigors of college-level coursework; thus, placement and remediation were considered necessary means of catching students up (Stahl, 2000). This argument promised a foundation that would beget greater success in academic coursework for undereducated

11

students, which bolstered the expansion of remediation at the community college (Lundell & Highbee, 2002). For most community colleges from the 1960s to the 2000s, placement and remediation were necessary measures to ensure students were up for the challenge of later academic coursework (Lundell & Highbee, 2002). Indeed, the traditional opinion of placement and developmental education was that students had no hope of succeeding in later coursework without it, and over 80% of community colleges had similar systems of placing and remediating students in the 1970s and 1980s (Boylan et al., 1988).

In the 1990s, developmental education experienced a resurgence as longer sequences of remedial courses became popular (Lundell & Highbee, 2002). The argument for these stretch sequences—which could include as many as five noncredit courses—was that students required time to develop the skills they were missing (Stahl, 2000). The prevalent attitude was that if a student had missed years of skill-building, a single semester of coursework could not be sufficient to catch them up and prepare them for college-level coursework (Hern, 2012). This began an enduring tradition of requiring students who were determined as being underprepared by placement testing to take as many as 2 years' worth of remedial coursework (Hern, 2012). Hern (2012) further noted that during this time, students would be unable to take other coursework since freshman math and English coursework is typically a prerequisite for other courses.

Overall, the community college system is inextricably tied to developmental education and the issues that plague it. Through attempts to provide greater access to students through the provision of additional support, developmental education inadvertently placed additional barriers in students' path to success (Hern, 2012; Lundell & Highbee, 2002; Stahl, 2000). Over time, it

has become clear that previous concepts of what is necessary to aid in learning must change in order to prevent gatekeeping and the stymying of success.

Conflict Theory of Education

Born from the writing of Karl Marx, conflict theory contends that humanity is constantly competing for limited resources (Turner, 1975). This stems from an ingrained need to have more than others and rule over them (Omer & Jabeen, 2016). For the most part, this urge to dominate has been mitigated as civilization has matured, yet Marx would argue that this part of human nature will always manifest somehow (Turner, 1975). At its core, conflict theory notes that government systems work to reinforce social class (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). While humanity has created mechanisms through the government to assist individuals in accessing resources and advancing socially, these mechanisms inherently and perhaps inadvertently reinforce the status quo (Turner, 1975). This is where the conflict in conflict theory lies; while humanity has transcended animalistic urges to keep others down, we still unintentionally embed barriers to our fellow people in our institutions (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Turner, 1975). Ultimately, our systems become a conflict of interest in themselves through inhibiting the progress they promise.

The conflict theory of education points to inadvertent gatekeeping measures—such as placement testing and long, remediated class sequences—in the education system as a means of perpetuating social inequity (Omer & Jabeen, 2016). This theoretical lens argues that mechanisms that prevent equal access to resources in education do more harm than simply lengthening the time a student might spend in school (Omer & Jabeen, 2016). Furthermore, as education is an essential component of social mobility, this lens contends that the purpose of schooling exists in triplicate: (a) cognitive development through an established curriculum, (b) socialization through structured interactions with peers and instructors, and (c) preparation for

13

the workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Conflict theorists in education argue that denying access to the system that provides these essential components of humanity essentially prevents people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds receiving what our educational system has promised (Turner, 1975).

The consequences of not reconciling the conflict within our education system between the promise of social mobility and the barriers to access, which are tied to socioeconomic background fall largely on the students. As placement reformists, proponents of acceleration, and conflict theorists agree, making access to educational resources difficult is a key means of hindering the socioeconomic growth of students (Bowles et al., 2017; Hern, 2012).

Acceleration and Placement Reform

As previously noted, when a student first stepped foot on a community college campus, they would be subjected to a lengthy test designed to ascertain what they were academically prepared for in terms of math and English. In most cases, these placement tests would discover that the student was underprepared for college-level coursework in math and English, resulting in placing the student in one or more remedial courses that would not earn college credit (Jaggars et al., 2014). Students placed in remedial education were less likely to enroll in any courses after taking a placement exam let alone pass a course (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011; Stahl, 2000). Ultimately, it was determined by several groups, including the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group), California Acceleration Project, and others, that the more remedial coursework a student was required to undertake, the less likely they were to ever complete coursework in math or English regardless of motivation or academic ability (Hanover Research, 2015). Moreover, remedial coursework typically prevents a student from entering their chosen program of study, which is heavily

correlated with a student never committing to a program of study or earning a credential at all, as discovered by Jenkins and Cho (2012). Their 5-year study of community college students revealed that traditional placement policies and the requirement of remedial courses were crucial points in a student's educational journey that were more likely to lead to lower rates of persistence, retention, and completion (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Educators and researchers were finding that the community college system had a significant problem in the traditional placement and remediation system.

These results were not isolated, as community colleges nationwide found that when students were placed based on high-school GPA rather than the traditional placement test, they were able to pass college transferable (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2012; RP Group, 2018; Stahl, 2000). This solidified the push to bridge the gap between students' perceived abilities and their actual motivation to perform by reforming placement testing and traditional educational pathways (Hern, 2012). The increased distrust in placement testing and the data from schools that completely accelerated their coursework resulted in several states implementing a ban on placement testing and recommendations for shorter pathways in basic skills work (RP Group, 2018). In the 2010s, notable states implementing these changes included California, Texas, and Florida, with many more poised to follow (RP Group, 2018); thus began a movement to eliminate or condense remedial coursework and revise placement standards that forced students into remediation.

In most cases, modern placement testing takes the form of a test that adjusts to its taker; that is, if a student is performing poorly on earlier questions, the test will adjust and not provide more difficult content, effectively robbing the student of additional opportunities to demonstrate their skills (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Although placement testing has historically been a

large part of the education process, in the 1970s many institutions pursued other means of placement such as entrance interviews and evaluation of writing samples to mitigate equity and validity concerns (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). This established a precedent for education without problematic testing (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). However, when these changes failed to make an immediate impact on graduation rates, placement testing was widely reinstated with few changes to improve the system (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011).

In a 2012 study on high-stakes placement testing, Judith Scott-Clayton discovered that traditional placement testing was more accurately predictive in math than it was in English. Furthermore, this extensive study discovered that placement testing is more likely to predict who will succeed in college coursework than who will fail (Scott-Clayton, 2012). That is, placement testing can accurately predict that students will pass math or English courses but does not offer accurate insight into which students might fail (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Ultimately, the study recommended multiple-measures placement over traditional high-stakes placement testing, as a multiple-measures system is more likely to prevent catastrophic misplacement that could lower a student's overall success (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Multiple-measures placement requires the use of at least two or more criteria separate from standardized testing to assess a student's readiness for college coursework and make course placement decisions (California Community Colleges, n.d.). These measures can include transcripts, previous levels of coursework, surveys, aptitude tests, vocational or military experience, interviews, holistic scoring of writing, and other indicators of the potential to succeed in college-level coursework (California Community Colleges, n.d.). The Multiple Measures Assessment Project (MMAP) found that using any two of the aforementioned measures to place students was more likely to put students in appropriate coursework (RP Group,

2018). Furthermore, multiple-measures placement began to correct the problem of students of color being placed in coursework that was below their abilities (RP Group, 2018).

Another common strategy that is often part of a multiple-measures approach to combat the issues evident in traditional placement comes in the form of directed self-placement. Balay and Nelson (2012) explored the creation and implementation of a directed self-placement tool at a regional branch of a large University. Directed self-placement is a strategy for placing students in writing courses that relies on students being able to self-assess their reading and writing skills. Carefully crafted surveys ask a series of questions that allow the student to conclude for themselves whether they need remedial courses in writing and, if so, how many. After exploring research on the arbitrary and often limited efficacy of traditional placement tests, Balay and Nelson (2012) opted to create and implement a directed self-placement tool based on quantitative data from their school. The researchers created a questionnaire that relied heavily on high-school GPA, SAT, or ACT scores, and each student's perceptions of their own writing skills. Balay and Nelson (2012) tracked each student's self-placement results against their subsequent grades in their chosen writing class. They found that students earned grades that were consistent with previous years' standards, which suggested that students were not placing themselves in college-level coursework to take fewer courses, but rather accurately choosing coursework that fit their abilities. The researchers noted that grades do not always correlate to competent writing skills; however, because they are the only consistent indicator of success, grades are the best measure available for assessing the directed self-placement tool (Balay & Nelson, 2012).

Nodine et al. (2013) found that another solution for impeded entry into programs of study and graduation seemed to come in the form of acceleration, a completion strategy designed to minimize the number of courses a student is required to take before attempting college

17

transferable or for-credit coursework. The key principles behind acceleration include placement reform, which does not require students to take remedial coursework, shorter developmental pathways, additional support, and remediation in tandem with college-level coursework (Nodine et al., 2013). Furthermore, the Community College Research Center (n.d.) found that acceleration provides students with fewer opportunities for exit points and better alignment with college-level coursework, since math and English courses are streamlined to their most essential components. Indeed, the bulk of scholarship in acceleration and placement reform has found that the goal of acceleration—to facilitate students' completion of courses with the least delay or obstruction—is accomplished (Hern, 2012; Nodine et al., 2013).

Acceleration is a data-driven concept where taking more courses at lower levels does not contribute to student success nor mastery of subject material, which is typically achieved through the compression of remedial coursework into one-level below transfer or the complete elimination of remedial coursework (Hern, 2012). Ultimately, acceleration suggests that more English education in remedial coursework does not beget greater success in college nor mastery of the subject material (Hern, 2012). This concept justified the change in English course sequencing and placement that motivates the present study (Jaggars et al., 2015). Acceleration as a concept is based on three main principles: (1) additional remediated coursework has a detrimental effect on persistence, retention, and completion rates; (2) remediated coursework disproportionately affects students of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds; and (3) accelerated coursework in a foundational subject such as English does not lead to decreased subject mastery (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2015; Rutschow& Schnieder, 2011).

While acceleration and placement reform seemed the clear path forward for ensuring students graduate, the logistics of implementing viable acceleration strategies are far more

complicated. Indeed, common approaches vary widely from institution to institution. Some community colleges pursued a co-requisite model that required the student to take a companion course to support their learning and quickly remediate any skill deficits (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2019). Others focused on placement reform that emphasized multiple-measures assessment, a holistic examination of students' past educational experiences, or directed self-placement, a survey instrument that asks students to critically self-evaluate their academic readiness (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Hern (2012) found that nearly every institution that adopted acceleration or placement reforms emphasized additional support services in the form of embedded tutors, additional access to support, or pedagogical adjustments.

Acceleration has been linked to the equity crisis in our nation's education system as a strong correlation exists between the negative impacts of traditional placement and remedial education disproportionately affecting students of color (Hern, 2012; Kuo, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2018). Undeniably, for groups of students with historically disenfranchised backgrounds, most studies have found that students were twice as likely to complete college-level English if they started there rather than levels below regardless of high-school GPA or placement testing results (Hern, 2012; Kuo, 2014; RP Group, 2018). Students with disabilities were also twice as likely to complete college-level English when not required to take remedial coursework (RP Group, 2018). The Multiple Measures Assessment Project team study examined 7 years of community-college data regarding English and math placement, concluding that "we are unable to identify any group of students who complete transfer-level English, statistics, or pre-calculus courses at a lower rate when placed directly into those classes rather than one level below transfer" (RP Group, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds saw gains in the time taken to progress through math and

19

English coursework under acceleration strategies (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2019). Even when community colleges saw decreases in pass rates for their transferable courses, there were still significant improvements in persistence, retention, and completion (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a study conducted by the RP Group (2018) titled "Comparative Throughput Analysis for AB705 Compliance: Disaggregation by EOPS and DSPS Student Populations" found compelling evidence to support multiple measures in bridging equity gaps in underserved populations. For the EOPS population, the study found that students across all ranges of high-school GPA were twice as likely to complete college-level English if they started there rather than levels below (RP Group, 2018). DSPS students were also twice as likely to complete college-level English when not required to take remedial coursework (RP Group, 2018). Undoubtedly, to discuss acceleration is to examine equity and the traditional constructs that might stymy a student from achieving their goals.

In most states that mandate a change to placement and course sequencing, forms of multiple-measures placement and acceleration of math and English courses are implemented in tandem (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2019). Indeed, while placement reform and acceleration are not mutually inclusive, they both address the issue of inequitable barriers to student success and tend to be a dual-pronged approach to rectifying completion issues (Hern, 2012).

Criticisms of Acceleration and Placement Reform

Like any plan for widespread change to an established system, cogent criticisms of the proposal have been levied. Indeed, many skeptics of acceleration and placement reform contend that students need time to master competencies, hence the traditional remediation stretch of courses (Edgecome, 2011). Any initiative tied to the Completion Agenda, the federal emphasis on students finishing their program of study, comes under heavy scrutiny because many in

education feel that the push to graduate students leaves them unprepared for the workforce (Humphreys, 2012). The Completion Agenda certainly encompasses acceleration and the assessment of student learning outcomes but rarely in the same conversation (McPhail, 2011). That is, no studies have explored the impact of acceleration on student learning outcome mastery, but many exist on acceleration and student learning outcomes in general. Therefore, the success of accelerated coursework and placement reform in increasing persistence and retention appears to be divorced from the preservation of academic rigor (McPhail, 2011).

Even widely explored answers to traditional placement testing, such as directed self-placement and multiple-measures placement, have been heavily criticized by practitioners. In one study, the directed self-placement tool was found to be a less reliable indicator of student success and correct placement than the simple use of SAT scores (Balay & Nelson, 2012). Students with higher writing scores on the SAT were more likely to succeed in college-level coursework (Balay & Nelson, 2012). Furthermore, female students and those of color were found to display lower levels of confidence in their literacy skills and to place themselves in remedial coursework despite SAT scores that would indicate success in college-level coursework (Balay & Nelson, 2012). Obviously, this finding has major implications for the purported purpose of placement reform as an enactor of equity.

One of the main issues with acceleration and placement reform is a pervading sense that, inevitably, standards would be lowered in subject mastery to expedite students' progress toward a degree (Edgecome, 2011). While ample studies exist on the positive impact of acceleration and placement reform on retention, persistence, and graduation rates, few studies have actively engaged with faculty concerns that students are not sufficiently learning the subject material (Edgecome, 2011; Hanover Research, 2015). Those that exist tend to focus on subject mastery

21

gains in math over English, probably because math assessment is less subjective and time-intensive than writing assessment (Edgecome, 2011). Other studies use the passing of subsequent coursework to indicate subject mastery (Henson & Hern, 2019). However, such studies rarely track whether students pursued coursework in similar subjects or if they mastered the material presented in those courses. To further complicate these matters, many dissenters of placement reform and acceleration have not conducted formal studies but rather report anecdotal findings and impressions (Almy, 2017; Jaschik, 2011).

Many instructors, particularly in English, have the impression that acceleration encourages the passing of students without consideration for the rich experiences that can be provided through slower, sustained learning (Almy, 2017; Jaschik, 2011). Particularly at the community-college level, instructors feel as though they are being discouraged from teaching difficult texts as it may stymy pass rates in their courses (Jaschik, 2011). When acceleration first started to gain traction, some departments even considered abolishing the traditional research paper in English composition as it was proving to be a major barrier to students remaining in the course (Jaschik, 2011). To combat this "quality shortfall," whether perceived or real, heavy reliance on clear student learning outcomes and their meaningful assessment are necessary because these processes enable an institution to reconcile quality and completion for the betterment of the whole student experience (Humphreys, 2012).

Furthermore, research and administrative contingencies could impact the perceived efficacy of acceleration and placement reform strategies. As noted by Rutschow and Schnieder (2011) in a study examining over a dozen community colleges, few truly experimental studies on acceleration exist, and those that are quasi-experimental fail to account for potential extenuating factors such as student motivation, pedagogical strategies, or subject mastery. Even the adjunct

faculty system could sway acceleration data as job-insecure faculty members may be disinclined to fail large numbers of students in accelerated coursework (Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011).

<div align="center">Measures of Student Success in Accelerated and Placement-Reformed Institutions</div>

One of the key measures of student success in accelerated and placement-reformed institutions is persistence. Persistence refers to students' continuation of coursework; that is, their perseverance in academic work beyond a single course (Shechtman, 2017). Simply put, persistence is the continuation of an academic goal even if at another institution. As long as a student is continuing to pursue a stated educational goal, they are considered to be persisting. In nonaccelerated and placement-reformed community colleges, students were highly unlikely to persist past a single remediated course (Hern, 2012). The more required courses that did not earn college credit, the more likely a student was to drop out entirely (Hern, 2012). Persistence is a key measure of student success as the mere continuation of coursework is positively linked to higher graduation rates, greater self-satisfaction, and a higher likelihood of pursuing additional education (Shechtman, 2017). Thus, measuring persistence is also a measure of long-term academic success in students.

Another key measure of student success is retention, namely the continuation toward an academic goal at a specific institution (Pruett & Absher, 2015). Like persistence, this measure of student success hinges on a student continuing toward a stated academic goal (Shechtman, 2017). However, retention more specifically measures persevering toward a goal at a specific institution (Pruett & Absher, 2015). Retention is an indicator of the student experience as institutions with lower rates of retention have been perceived by students to be mechanisms of gatekeeping that do not facilitate student retention (Pruett & Absher, 2015). While persistence can tell a researcher that a student is feeling empowered to pursue education, retention can

indicate an institutional commitment to the student experience (Pruett & Absher, 2015; Schectman, 2017). One study of community college retention found that students in remediated coursework who did not earn credit were much less likely to be retained by an institution (Goel, 2002). According to the surveyed students, this poor retention was due to them being unable to access their real academic goals due to the barrier of remedial coursework imposed by placement testing (Goel, 2002). Indeed, many studies have found that retention is a crucial indicator of students' sense of belief that they can achieve an academic goal and the institution's assistance in that pursuit (Goel, 2002; Hern, 2012; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Furthermore, assessing retention can serve as a holistic clue to the larger workings of a system (Pruett & Absher, 2015). A failure to retain students has been linked to a failure to embody the college's mission statement, provide adequate support to underserved populations, and hold instructors accountable (Pruett & Absher, 2015). This places retention as a multifaceted indicator of (1) the student experience at an institution, and (2) the systemic barriers of a specific institution that prevent students from continuing their education (Pruett & Absher, 2015).

However, while retention and persistence are separate measures of student success, they are easily conflated in the minds of faculty. For the most part, faculty and counselors consider persistence and retention to be the same metric for measuring student continuation (Pruett & Absher, 2015). For the purposes of most studies determining faculty perceptions of student continuation, persistence is used as an all-encompassing term to indicate impressions of students moving to a course beyond the one they are currently in (Goel, 2002; Hern, 2012). While detangling the terms can reveal more nuanced insights into the student experience, using the terms independently is more likely to confuse survey respondents and muddy the data.

Completion, or the achievement of an academic goal, is another key measure of student success (Harbour, 2018). Whether it be a certificate or a degree, completion refers to students attaining the academic award they set out to attain when entering the institution (Harbour, 2018). Bolstered by the Completion Agenda, facilitating students reaching their goals is a key measure of the success of any community college (Harbour, 2018; McPhail, 2011). It is this terminal point in a student's academic journey that is used to indicate proper stewardship in guiding an educational process (Harbour, 2018). Furthermore, completion of a community college certificate or degree is definitively linked to higher wage-earning and overall higher lifestyle satisfaction; thus, completion is a key factor in determining the efficacy of an institution in fulfilling its mission for students (Harbour, 2018). However, completion can only indicate that a student persisted in a program, was retained by an institution, and earned an award, and rarely reveals the mastery of subject material (Harbour, 2018).

Student learning outcome assessment, on the other hand, is the evaluation of subject mastery at the course level (Suskie, 2018). While persistence, retention, and completion can indicate an institution's impact on the student experience as a whole, it is primarily through student learning outcome assessment that educators determine whether students are truly understanding specific course material (Suskie, 2018). Typically, faculty members as a department create specific course goals that are linked to key skills and abilities that would indicate mastery of the subject material (Hundley & Kahn, 2019). Divorced from the grading process, student learning outcome assessment allows for the evaluation of gains in education based solely on the achievement of a predetermined academic goal (Suskie, 2018).

By separating overarching course grades from the student learning outcome assessment process, instructors can evaluate student achievement without the influence of other institutional

factors such as participation credit or perceived pressure to pass students (Suskie, 2018). For example, in a 1991 study conducted at a Washington community college, the researchers conducted a holistic assessment of student learning outcomes through a common exam (Tiffany et al., 1991). While not an accelerated institution, this study found that course grades and persistence did not always indicate subject-level mastery or the achievement of student learning outcomes (Tiffany et al., 1991). In fact, evaluators' scoring remained consistent across students and determined that many students were passing courses but were unable to demonstrate the established goals of the English composition course (Tiffany et al., 1991). The study emphasized a crucial tenet of student learning outcome assessment: namely that persistence, retention, and completion do not automatically equate to subject-level mastery (Tiffany et al., 1991).

In terms of the widespread acceptance of student learning outcome assessment as a measure of subject-level mastery, this process is widely implemented across the nation with great success. Student learning outcome assessment comes out of a nationwide initiative to create a culture of evidence in student learning (Shavelson, 2007). While the nuanced implementation of student learning outcome assessment can vary from institution to institution, the overarching principles remain the same (Shavelson, 2007; Suskie, 2018). Many institutions emphasize collaborative assessment where a common assessment tool is administered across all courses, whereas others follow an individual model where instructors choose and implement their own assessments (Suskie, 2018). While collaborative assessment can provide a more holistic, programmatic understanding of student learning, individual assessment still has merits in establishing necessary changes in pedagogy and gauging subject mastery (Suskie, 2018). The differences between common assessments and class-specific assessment can be distilled into a macro versus micro view of subject mastery (Suskie, 2018). Essentially, common assessments

provide a macro view of all courses being assessed, whereas a class-specific assessment provides more insight into the micro view of an individual teacher's pedagogical choices (Suskie, 2018).

Ultimately, as a measure of student success, the assessment of student learning outcomes is a direct reflection of subject-level mastery directed by subject experts. Thus, such assessment is a direct reflection of a student's achievement in a specific course rather than their overarching journey in education (Hundley & Kahn, 2019). Coupled with persistence, retention, and completion rates, student learning outcome assessment allows for a full picture of students' achievement at an institution.

The Role of Faculty, Counselors, and Perception in Reform

Faculty and counselor perception of new initiatives is an oft-studied issue in education as changes in the system require the backing of constituents. One study on a new online learning program gauged faculty perception against student performance and found that while faculty were dubious about the efficacy of online learning in their field, students were succeeding (Totaro et al., 2011). Because of the pervasive perception that students could not learn in an online environment, many faculty members chose to abandon online teaching altogether (Totaro et al., 2011). This study illustrates the necessity of confronting perceptions in order to compare them with the realities of an initiative. Failure to correct or validate the perceptions of those conducting a new initiative places the work at an immediate disadvantage. In a 2012 study on high-impact teaching practices, Paulson found that gauging faculty perception was a key step toward strengthening the overarching success of a project. The study found that when faculty members do not understand the roots of an initiative or the terminology associated with it, they are more likely to perceive the initiative to be failing or detrimental (Paulson, 2012). If these perceptions are unfounded or in direct conflict with the reality of student success measures, they

can be harmful to students. In Beck and Blumer's (2016) study on faculty and student perceptions of laboratory exercises, faculty perception was used as a key indicator of student learning. They found that faculty often have a nuanced view of their teaching practices that is not fully captured by grades.

Furthermore, a 2009 study on the perceptions of faculty on accreditation affirmed that for the successful implementation of any initiative, the faculty must feel included in the proceedings or a pervading sense of distrust can mar the progress of the initiative (Hail et al., 2019). The researchers found that the fewer the faculty members included in even federally mandated activities such as accreditation, the more distrust for the process that festered (Hail et al., 2019). Furthermore, acknowledgment of faculty contributions to implementation was key to establishing buy-in for accreditation and any actions taken based on the process (Hail et al., 2019). This sentiment has been echoed in nearly every study on acceleration; that is, if faculty perceive themselves to be uninvolved in implementation, then they also perceive the initiative to be unsuccessful or misguided (Edgecome, 2011; Humphreys, 2012; Nodine et al., 2013). In the literature noting dissenting opinions on placement and acceleration reform, many authors have noted faculty members being uninvolved in the changes made at their institution (Almy, 2017; Jaschik, 2011). It seems that gauging faculty and counselor perception of a change in the status quo is a necessary means of determining an effective path forward (Hail et al., 2019).

The Need for Further Study

Strangely, while student learning outcome assessment is a respected measure of student success and pedagogical development nationwide, it is rarely part of the success measures used to evaluate accelerated and placement-reformed community colleges (Suskie, 2018). Indeed, most studies have focused on the aforementioned measures of persistence, retention, and

28

completion to justify the success of accelerated and placement-reformed coursework (Adams et al., 2009;; Edgecombe, 2011; Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2014). While numerous studies have examined developing educational practices through the assessment of student learning outcomes in traditional English courses, comprehensive studies combining the values of the acceleration and placement reform movement are sparse. Furthermore, the evaluation of subject mastery facilitated by student learning outcome assessment are definitely lacking in evaluating accelerated programs. As previously noted, subject mastery is a key criticism of the acceleration and placement reform movement, but student learning outcome assessment could illuminate the impacts of acceleration and placement reform on subject mastery. Furthermore, the role of faculty in the acceleration and placement reform process is lacking formal study, leaving institutions in a quagmire of anecdotal evidence. The present study endeavors to bridge the gap between the values of the acceleration and placement reform movement with the faculty concerned with preserving the rigor of their subject.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter seeks to establish the process for answering the RQs established in Chapter 1. As outlined in Chapter 2, acceleration and placement reform in English have demonstrable impacts on persistence, retention, and completion, but their effect on student learning outcome mastery lacks research attention.

First, the purpose and RQs are revisited, followed by a description of the conceptual lens that drives the study. Then, the overarching research design is delineated along with the specific parameters of the study. The means of collecting data and its analysis are outlined along with considerations of ethical concerns and limitations. The chapter ends with a summary emphasizing the preceding information.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This work studied a specific institution's experiences with acceleration and placement reform in English coursework and the impacts on student success as defined in Chapter 2. This study aimed to compare the success rates of students with the perceptions of their success from faculty and counselors.

The RQs guiding this inquiry are as follows:

RQ1: What acceleration and placement reform strategies in English were implemented at the institution from Fall 2014 to Spring 2020?

RQ2: In what ways did student persistence and completion change during this time?

RQ3: In what ways did student learning outcome mastery in English change during this time?

RQ4: What are the faculty and counselor perceptions of the influence of acceleration and placement reform in English on student persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

RQ5: How do these perceptions compare to actual rates of persistence, completion, and subject

mastery?

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods case study design. A case study is "an in-depth

exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project,

policy, institution, program, or system in a real-life context… The primary purpose is to generate

an in-depth understanding of a specific topic" (Simons, 2009, p. 10). The key aspects of a case

study necessitate that "cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed

information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time"

(Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Case studies are distinct from other methodologies as they are

characterized by depth, boundaries, a multiplicity of sources and perspectives, and a real-life

context (Cook & Kamalodeen, 2019).

This particular research design was ideal for this study because it established clear

boundaries in what could be an unruly sample size, enables breadth in exploration, and allows

detailed analysis of specific data points. A case study also allowed for the "multiple

perspectives" of persistence, completion, student learning outcome assessment, and also faculty

and counselor perspectives for exploring the RQs (Cook & Kamalodeen, 2019). Moreover, this

study had clear boundaries of time, activity, and location over several years, which lend

themselves to the ideals of case study research. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, there was a clear

gap in the literature surrounding perception and subject-level mastery in English acceleration and

placement reform, which necessitates additional depth for the study while remaining focused

explicitly on the guiding RQs. Furthermore, case studies have been the most common study type

for exploring accelerated and placement-reformed institutions (Adams et al., 2009; Hern, 2012).

However, most relevant studies have not examined subject-level mastery or faculty and counselor perceptions. Adding qualitative data to this study broadened the information for analysis to address RQ4. Ultimately, this study aimed to compare perceptual and empirical information to address RQ5, and the qualitative lens in this case study played a key role in fulfilling the purpose of this research.

This study used a convergent mixed-methods design to establish a variety of data points to answer the RQs. As noted by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), "a mixed methods case study design is a type of mixed methods study in which the quantitative and qualitative data collection, results, and integration are used to provide in-depth evidence for a case(s) or develop cases for comparative analysis" (p. 116). This was an ideal construct for this research because reconciling the perceived and documented effects of acceleration and placement reform was a guiding outcome of this study. By using qualitative and quantitative data, this researcher established a convergent design allowing both types of data to be used in creating a fuller understanding of acceleration and placement reform on the aforementioned measures of student success (Cook & Kamalodeen, 2019). As described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017):

> A convergent design occurs when the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process, prioritizes the methods equally, and keeps the strands independent during analysis, and then mixes the results during the overall interpretation. (pp. 70–71)

This study employed bounded time and location coupled with qualitative and quantitative data sources, which were merged to better understand the results of acceleration and placement reform.

Figure 1 illustrates how each RQ was addressed through quantitative and qualitative data.

Figure 1

Chart Illustrating the Necessary Data for Answering Each Research Question (RQ)

RQ1 — • Description of the institution's approach to placement reform and acceleration in English using document analysis of public information

RQ2 — • Institutional data tracking student rates of persistence and completion using document analysis of public information tracked against changes in placement and course sequencing

RQ3 — • Institutional data on assessment of student learning outcomes in English composition using document analysis of public information tracked against changes in placement and course sequencing

RQ4 — • Likert scale survey quantifying faculty and counselor perceptions of changes in persistence, completion, and subject mastery accompanied by coded open-ended questions

RQ5 — • Comparison of institutional data on persistence, completion, and SLO assessment against survey data by correlating survey questions to institutional data points

Study Setting

The setting for this study was Sand College, a community college in the Southwest United States. The college is in a diverse region serving both suburban and agricultural communities. The institution has a main campus with four smaller satellite locations, all offering English composition courses. Sand College is one of the few higher education institutions in the area and offers free tuition and an onboarding program focused on refreshing basic skills for incoming first-year students from local high schools.

This institution serves over 15,000 students, with nearly all attempting an English composition course at some point in their education. The student population is primarily Hispanic and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

33

Like most introductory writing courses, Sand College's English composition course focuses on writing, research, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills. Typically, between 50 and 70 sections of English composition are offered each semester. Sand College uses multi-measures in terms of placement reform, including GPA, self-reported preparedness, prior coursework, directed self-placement, and counseling interviews. The college has accelerated English coursework in a phased process. First, courses were accelerated from three-levels below transfer to two-levels below transfer. Then, they were further accelerated to a one-level below transfer course. Currently, there is no requirement for students to take any coursework in English that is not college-level.

This particular site was chosen because of how typical its setting is for placement reform and acceleration. This research was informed by an instrumental case study design; thus, the site itself is not of primary interest but rather its broad similarities to other institutions (Cook & Kamalodeen, 2019).

Study Participants

Every student who attempted an English composition course from Fall 2014 through Spring 2020 was included in these data. Students who dropped the English course after the census date were not reflected in the data. These data encompassed students attempting the English composition course at every Sand College campus through online and in-person modalities. No students were contacted—or identifiable—through the course of this study.

Only the survey designed to gather data on RQ4 required the direct participation of research participants. It sought to establish the perceptions of faculty and counselors on the impact that placement and acceleration reform have had on student success as preciously delineated. The participants of this study were selected using criterion sampling; that is,

participants must fulfill a particular set of criteria to be eligible for the survey (Demir & Pismek, 2018). The participants of this study were adjunct and full-time English faculty members and counselors with direct involvement in placement or the facilitation of students choosing their English courses using multiple measures. These particular individuals had the most direct contact with placement and acceleration reform and had the most insight into the elements being studied.

As of Fall 2020, there were 12 full-time English instructors, over 20 semiregularly employed adjunct English instructors, and 12 counselors directly associated with placement in English coursework. All of these employees were asked to participate in a survey that would qualify their perceptions of the impact of acceleration and placement reform on student persistence, completion, and subject-level mastery in English. Ideally, in terms of sample size, all of the aforementioned individuals would have responded; however, half of each category of employee (full-time, adjunct, and counselor) provided enough relevant data to proceed with the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Because full-time faculty members both advise students in placement and teach the course in question, their participation was crucial for generating meaningful data.

Data Collection

As this research is a mixed-methods case study, there were two main avenues of instrumentation, the course of action for gathering data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The first leveraged quantitative data through document analysis and institutional research regarding persistence and completion; these were gathered from the site. Student learning outcome data in Freshman English Composition courses were also gathered through a digital institutional repository. These institutional data were used to address RQs 1 and 2 over the bounded time

period of Fall 2014 to Spring 2020. The institutional data consisted of existing records broken down into ethnicity and gender.

The primary means for producing these data was document analysis, namely the examination of public records on placement reform and acceleration at the institution (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The data were both qualitative in defining the measures taken to implement placement reform and acceleration at the institution as well as quantitative through numerical data that track student persistence and completion over time. The data gathered included all sites of Sand College but were limited to the introductory Freshman Composition courses offered in the Fall and Spring semesters of the noted years. Through document analysis of meeting minutes, college resolutions, and handbooks key pieces of information were extracted and summarized to characterize the placement and course-sequencing changes that occurred at the institution.

Second, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered regarding the perceptions of English faculty and counselors on persistence, completion, and subject-level mastery of students in Freshman English Composition courses through a survey designed and administered through Google Docs, a recognized tool for generating reliable data both quantitatively and qualitatively (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) noted that combining survey data with an observational case study provides a more substantial basis for analysis. The survey included in this case provided data to answer RQ4 by qualifying the perceptions of faculty and counselors on acceleration and placement reform at the site using a set of Likert scales. This questionnaire strategy asked participants to ascribe their attitudes to a value on a scale (Likert, 1932). Rather than leaving the survey entirely open-ended, questions measured on the Likert scale allowed for a more systematic understanding of the perceptions of faculty and counselors

(Likert, 1932). However, four open-ended questions rounded out the survey to capture any valuable observations that might prove instrumental in answering the RQs guiding this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The open-ended questions also combated the common problem with Likert scale surveys: a lack of insight into why the respondents answered in the way they did (Likert, 1932).

Table 1 connects survey questions to the RQs they will address. By specifically mapping survey questions to the measures of student success that this study is interested in, the comparison between the institutional data and perceptions of faculty and counselors was made clearer.

Table 1

Table Connecting Survey Questions to the Research Questions (RQs)

Research Question	Survey Question*
RQ2 Were there any changes to student persistence and completion during this time?	Prior to this institution moving to multiple-measures placement, how accurately do you feel students were placed into English coursework?
	Prior to this institution accelerating English coursework, how prepared do you think students were for English 1A?
	Under placement reform or multiple-measures placement, how accurately do you think students are placed in English coursework?
	Under accelerated English coursework, how prepared do you think students are for English 1A?
	Based solely on your own perceptions and existing knowledge, how do you think students are performing on the following metrics under acceleration and placement reform: persistence and completion.
	Based solely on your own perceptions and existing knowledge, how do you think students are performing on the following metric under acceleration and placement reform: completion.
RQ3 Were there any changes in student learning outcome mastery in English during this time?	Based solely on your own perceptions and existing knowledge, how do you think students are performing on the following metric under acceleration and placement reform: subject mastery.
	Prior to acceleration and placement reform, at the time students finished English 001A, had they generally achieved the following course goals?
	After acceleration and placement reform, at the time students finished English 001A, had they generally achieved the following course goals?

Research Question	Survey Question*
RQ4 What are the faculty and counselor perceptions of acceleration and placement reform in English in terms of student persistence, completion, and subject mastery?	Overall, do you see placement reform and multiple measures placement as a positive change at your institution? Overall, do you see acceleration of English coursework as a positive change at your institution? Do you have any other thoughts on how acceleration and placement reform in English has affected subject mastery, persistence, and completion? Do you have any thoughts on how acceleration and placement reform might affect certain groups of students more than others?

Note. *Survey questions are shortened due to space limitations. See the Appendix A for the full survey and additional participant questions.

Instrumentation

The survey development was largely informed by several existing surveys used to gauge faculty and counselor perceptions of other educational initiatives. In a 2019 study on faculty perceptions of the readiness to engage in online learning, a Likert-scale survey was thoroughly vetted for its ability to capture attitudes and impressions that are otherwise difficult to measure (Martin et al., 2019). The researchers focused on clear definitions of terms, careful wording of questions, and special consideration of the audience being surveyed (Martin et al., 2019). Furthermore, Paulson's (2012) survey on high-impact teaching practices served as inspiration for gauging faculty perceptions of new educational practices and the inclusion of open-ended questions. Paulson (2012) found that the four open-ended questions at the end of her survey captured more information about faculty frustrations and the necessity for further study. The specific student learning outcomes were included as survey questions to ensure actual data were

mapped to the perception of subject mastery as clearly as possible. Using standard survey construction principles and the aforementioned models, one open-ended question was included at the end of the survey created for this study to capture any impressions inspired by the Likert-scale questions. Beck and Blumer's (2016) survey on faculty perception found that less than four levels in Likert-scale questions did not produce sufficient nuances in responses; therefore, for most questions, a neutral option was included to better capture a range of responses. Both of the aforementioned surveys served as the basis for many questions in the survey used in the present study.

To ensure the survey is valid, its content was peer-reviewed by three English instructors, two counselors and one outside faculty member from outside institutions, as suggested by best-practice survey standards (Costello & Osborne, 2005). The survey initially conflated the role of faculty and counselor because they are interchangeable at Sand College, but feedback suggested this would possibly be confusing to respondents. Additional clarification of terminology was embedded in the questions to ensure that questions were clear to respondents and relevant to this study. Initial drafts of the survey instrument revealed the distinction between retention and persistence to be confusing to faculty and counselors. Peer reviewers suggested using only persistence because the term would be more familiar and accessible to the proposed survey respondents.

Data Analysis

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design that produced three independent streams of data based on RQs 1, 2, 3, and 4. First, RQ2 revealed any changes in persistence and completion that occurred while placement reform and acceleration were being implemented at the institution. These data were analyzed for changes in these measures as acceleration and

placement reforms took root at the institution, thus creating the first stream of data. Using descriptive data analysis strategies and secondary data produced by the institution, persistence, and completion rates were tracked against changes to acceleration and placement reform measures at the institution. If there were a changes in student persistence and completion rates that coincide with changes in placement and course sequencing, it might be surmised that these outcomes could be correlated. It is necessary to note that while a seeming correlation might be indicated through this temporal analysis of variables, this would not inherently indicate causation. Indeed, this analysis would only suggest a possible connection between factors and indicate an opportunity for further research.

Next, the institutional data for student learning outcome assessment were analyzed for changes along with the same parameters; that is, changes in mastery levels as they coincide with reforms. This created a second stream of data for RQ3 and initiated scholarship on the understudied third ideal of acceleration. The same associational data analysis strategy was applied to this data stream as to the previous one. That is, student learning outcome data were mapped to changes in placement and acceleration to determine whether a connection exists between the institutional shifts and student subject mastery in English.

Finally, a third data stream was produced through the results from the Likert-scale survey on faculty and counselor perceptions of acceleration and placement reform. As previously noted, this survey specifically asked faculty and counselors to relay their impressions of acceleration and placement reform at the institution. Furthermore, the open-ended survey questions were coded thematically to correlate to the defined measures of student success in this study: persistence, completion, and subject mastery. Using best-practice coding strategies, including multiple passes through responses, specific themes, and ascribing multifaceted answers to more

than one theme, the open-ended survey responses were classified according to the success measure they relate to (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The coding process followed the procedure delineated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). First, the data were organized with open-ended responses isolated from the rest of the survey and separated into discrete documents based on each question. Second, the data were thoroughly read several times, with recurrent themes identified. Third, a detailed analysis with the coding process necessitated separating responses based on emerging themes. Fourth, each of the themes was mapped to the success measures this study is researching. Finally, the responses were analyzed for their own revelations of perception then compared against the real data indicating student success during this bounded time period. This data stream was specifically answer RQ4 while producing a comparison point to address RQ5.

These streams of data converged when placed in a relational dimension of data merging, which allowed the comparison of all delineated success factors, namely persistence, completion, and subject mastery (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). The primary organizational method for this analysis was temporal as the success factors are tracked over a consistent set of time, resulting in a separative approach (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). That is, each data stream was matched against the same time period as they were analyzed. This allowed the researcher to analyze each piece individually and then compare them to determine an answer to RQ5.

For a clearer illustration of the convergent design of data analysis in this study, please refer to the following flow chart in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Flow Chart Illustrating the Three Data Streams in This Convergent Design Study
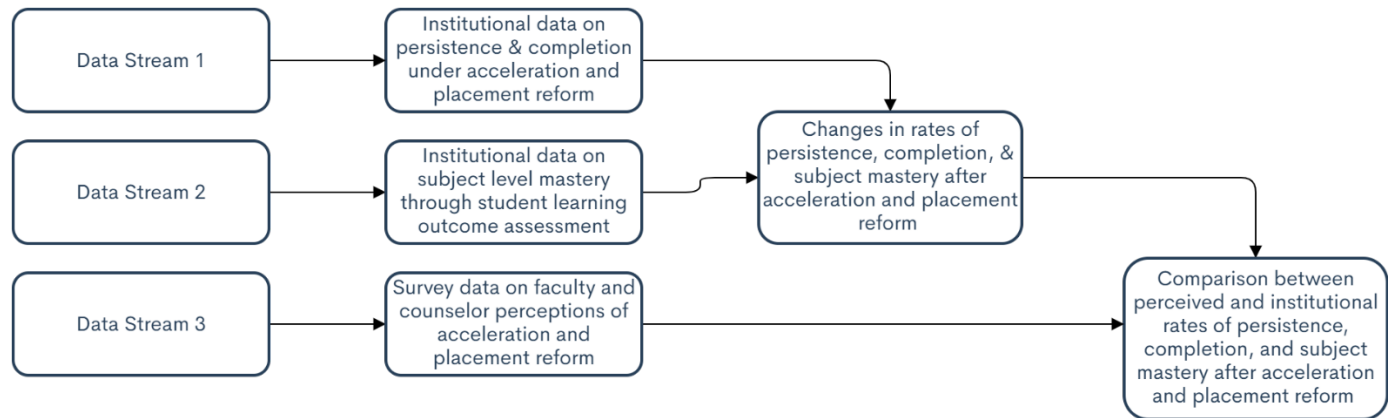
RQ5 was answered through a comparison of the perceptions of surveyed faculty and

counselors and analyzed through an iterative use of data (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017).

Specifically, the researcher compared the survey results informing RQ5 with the quantitative

results of RQs 2 and 3 to determine any disparities between the perception and reality of the

impact of acceleration and placement reform on student persistence, completion, and student

learning outcome mastery. Relevant survey questions were mapped to the institutional data

points that indicated actual results by matching questions to institutional data points. For

example, survey questions on a specific student learning outcome were matched to the

institutional data pertinent to that student learning outcome. By comparing responses to the

survey questions with the institutional data, potential discrepancies between the actual rates of

student persistence, completion, and subject mastery were identified, indicating gaps between the

perception of these success measures from faculty and counselors and the actual results.

Theoretical Lens

In terms of conflict theory in education, scholars point to the inequity and inequality

between classes in accessing education (Omer & Jabeen, 2016). This can be seen in the ease with

which lower-income and racially minoritized students can access quality education being equivalent to that experienced by students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In the United States, a strong correlation exists between students of color and those of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Hussar et al., 2020). Latinx and African-American students are more likely to attend primary and secondary schools with lower budgets, preventing access to quality educational materials and practices (Hussar et al., 2020). This inherently places such students at a disadvantage compared with their wealthier peers when entering postsecondary schools (Hussar et al., 2020). Conflict theorists in education would point to this disparity as a key indicator of the systemic tension between educational success and student demographics. As previously noted, both placement reform and acceleration are data-driven mechanisms that intend to reconcile these institutionalized disparities by opening access to the same educational opportunities afforded to students of higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Hern, 2012; Kuo, 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011).

Specifically, conflict theory in education was applied as a theoretical lens in analyzing the data obtained to answer RQs 1 and 2 and the open-ended question on diverse student groups included on the survey for RQ4. Conflict theory in education provided a basis for interpreting the success of placement reform strategies and accelerated coursework in improving the outcomes for students of color. By comparing previous persistence and completion rates of diverse populations with those after the implementation of multiple-measures placement and condensed course-sequencing, relationships between these initiatives and increased access to education were analyzed.

Ethical Considerations

Students were only studied as aggregated data points gathered from the institution. No students were directly contacted or engaged in this study. All faculty and counselor participants were notified of the study purpose and voluntarily chose to participate in the survey. As they are willing professional participants, there was little concern of ethics violations in the data collection. Furthermore, the survey was prefaced with an informed consent message to ensure participants understood that their responses were used in a study. Each question had a "no response" option to ensure participants were not pressured to respond. An institutional review board has reviewed and approved this study.

In terms of researcher bias, one criticism often made against case studies is the impact of the researcher's preconceived attitudes on both the collection and interpretation of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Indeed, this researcher is a faculty member in the studied department at the study site, which could pose a bias problem. Still, quantitative data were generated at the institutional level and qualitative data were collected anonymously. Mitigating this bias were the study approaches, which relied on quantitative data generated at the institutional level and qualitative data collected anonymously. Furthermore, this researcher has spent a significant amount of time reflecting on potential biases and is committed to consistently checking against her preconceived notions to ensure the validity of the study.

Limitations

This study has several key limitations. As a case study, the research is bounded in a specific time, in this instance Fall 2014 to Spring 2020, which limits the data being analyzed. Furthermore, a portion of the time of this study encompasses the Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in classes being moved exclusively online. These factors could cause certain changes in

the measures and perceptions of student success in English coursework. However, the nature of a case study necessitates the creation of specific parameters of time and space for research and the exploration of any external factors that might impact results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This researcher intends to consider the possible impact of these limitations on the study findings.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter emphasized the purpose and RQs guiding this study. A justification for the chosen mixed-methods case study methodology was presented with a plan for the study parameters. Finally, an exploration of ethical considerations and limitations was included to ensure the validity of the study.

Chapter 4 – Findings

This chapter explores the data collected about the five research questions that guided this study. These questions include the following:

RQ1: What acceleration and placement reform strategies in English were implemented at the institution from Fall 2016 to Spring 2020?

RQ2: In what ways did student persistence and completion change during this time?

RQ3: In what ways did student-learning outcome mastery in English change during this time?

RQ4: What are faculty and counselor perceptions of the influence of acceleration and placement reform in English on student persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

RQ5: How do these perceptions compare to actual rates of persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

This chapter is organized around the five research questions guiding this study, which drew on data gathered from the document analysis of institutional data and records, survey responses, and thematically coded responses to open-ended questions. First, an exploration of the timeline of placement reform and acceleration at the college set the stage for the subsequent relay of data. Next, by contextualizing the results through the institution's circumstances, greater insight into the implementation of placement reform and acceleration was gained. This was followed by persistence, completion, and student-learning outcome assessment data. Next, the thematic coding of open-ended survey responses was explored and compared to survey results and institutional data.
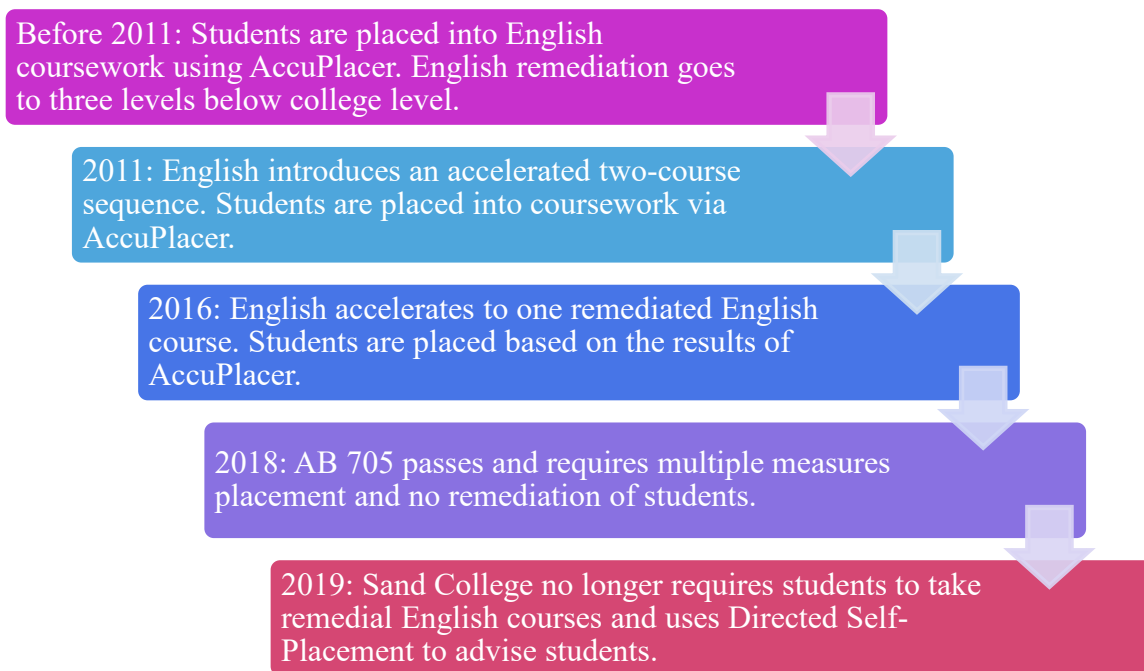
RQI: Timeline of Events for Placement Reform and Acceleration at Sand College

To fully answer RQ1, it was helpful to clarify the timeline. Placement reform and acceleration came to Sand College in a gradual, stepped process, as documented in college

resolutions, meeting minutes, and implementation schedules. Like many colleges, Sand College recognized the issues with traditional placement and course sequencing previously noted in the literature review featured in Chapter 2. Changes in course sequencing, placement systems, and advising were the primary means of attempting to reconcile the disparity between the mission of the institution and the issues surrounding traditional placement and remediated coursework (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Jaggars et al., 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011; Stahl, 2000). The institution focused on eliminating placement tests and consolidating coursework to remove systemic barriers to education, much like the studies highlighted in Chapter 2. Figure 3 illustrates the general timeline of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College.

Figure 3

Timeline of Placement Reform and Acceleration at Sand College

Before 2011: Students are placed into English coursework using AccuPlacer. English remediation goes to three levels below college level.

2011: English introduces an accelerated two-course sequence. Students are placed into coursework via AccuPlacer.

2016: English accelerates to one remediated English course. Students are placed based on the results of AccuPlacer.

2018: AB 705 passes and requires multiple measures placement and no remediation of students.

2019: Sand College no longer requires students to take remedial English courses and uses Directed Self-Placement to advise students.

Since its founding, Sand College's English department has emphasized basic skills and remedial coursework to prepare students for its transferable college composition course. A three-course sequence that did not count toward a degree or transfer was often recommended to students to help them succeed in their transferable composition course. The sequence began with sentence skills in the first course, proceeding to basic grammar skills and culminating in a course that emphasized paragraph construction.

Per departmental records, the English faculty at Sand College noted the loss of students from course to course in the three-course sequence. An accelerated two-course sequence was proposed in 2011 to rectify this situation. However, the transition to this shortened progression of classes was slow, and the two-course sequence did not immediately supplant the previous model. At one point, Sand College offered both the three-course and two-course sequences to students at the same time; students were categorized via AccuPlacer. Almost simultaneously, the last course in the previous three-sequence remedial stretch of English courses was converted into a standalone course designed to replace all remedial coursework. In 2012, this was a radical move in acceleration both nationally and locally, but it would not become the dominant remediated course option for students at Sand College until 2016 (Hern, 2012; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011).

By 2016, students were placed into a single remediated English course based on College Board's AccuPlacer, a typical placement exam for community colleges. Then, in 2018, AB 705, a California law mandating a change in remedial coursework and placement for community colleges, went into effect. This law essentially prevented colleges from requiring students to take any remediated coursework unless the institution could prove that the student would not succeed

in college-level transferable coursework. Ultimately, this legislation made most of the existing remediated coursework at Sand College obsolete.

Unlike accelerated coursework, placement reform came more slowly to Sand College. This shift was mainly due to the aforementioned change in legislation. In Spring 2018, multiple-measures placement was used in conjunction with AccuPlacer. For Sand College, multiple-measure placement consisted of student self-reported high school GPAs, AccuPlacer test scores, and placement recommendations primarily provided by counselors.

By Fall 2019, the AccuPlacer test was no longer used to place students. Instead, students were placed based on their self-reported GPA and largely encouraged to choose whether they would like to take remedial coursework in English. In addition, students were often directed toward a faculty-created guided self-placement tool. This homegrown document suggests a possible placement based on a student's self-assessment of their writing and reading skills. Above all, students were encouraged to speak with counselors regarding placement in English coursework to ensure that they were not taking classes that would impede their success as college students.

Sand College made no other adjustments to its curriculum, support structures, or interventions besides changes in course sequencing and placement strategies. Tutoring services were available, as they had always been through a writing center on campus. Ultimately, Sand College adopted placement reform and acceleration in its simplest form.

Changes in Student Persistence and Completion

Figure 4 depicts course persistence for students enrolled in freshman composition at Sand College from Fall 2014 to Spring 2020. In this instance, persistence follows Pruett and Absher's (2015) definition of students enrolled in a freshman composition course one fall term who

50

continued to take courses the following term. Again, data were gathered from public institutional records reported to the state Chancellor's office and included all students enrolled in English composition courses at the time of the census. During this time, student demographic data and enrollment rates remained consistent; that is, there were no changes in the student body makeup.

Figure 4

English Composition Course Fall-to-Spring Persistence 2014–2020

	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Course Persistence	85.2%	84.5%	85.7%	84.9%	85.1%	84.8%
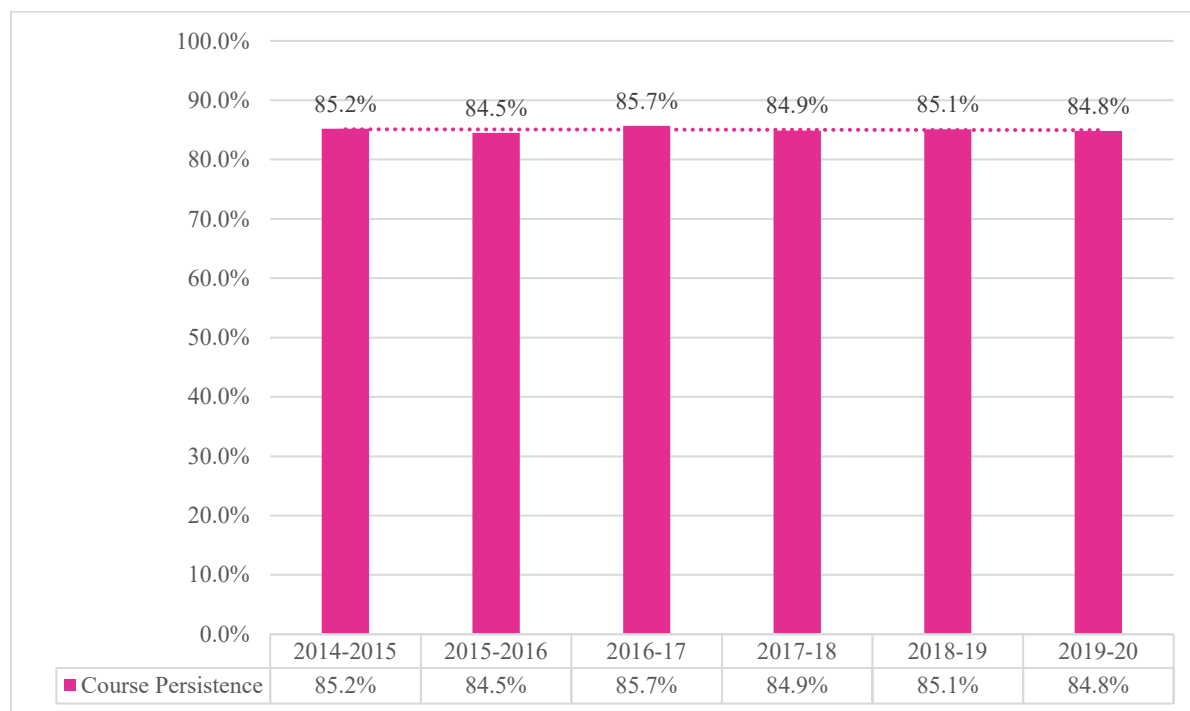
Note. Persistence refers to students continuing to take courses at an institution.

One of the intended outcomes of placement reform and acceleration is an increase in students persisting in coursework after taking transferable college courses whether or not they have passed the course (Hern, 2012). Based on the data presented in Figure 4, persistence has remained steady across Fall 2014–Spring 2020. During this period, on average, 85.03% of students enrolled in freshman composition at Sand College continued to take courses at the institution.

When compared against the previously outlined timeline of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College, there is little evidence suggesting that any of the changes in course sequencing, advising, or placement substantially affected students' persistence. Year by year, changes in placement and acceleration measures yielded consistent rates of persistence and success. While these results do not show the dramatic increases in persistence in English courses found in other studies (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Jaggars et al., 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011; Stahl, 2000), they do indicate that changes in placement and remediation do not harm persistence, as suggested by opponents of these measures (Edgecombe, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2018).

In terms of completion at Sand College, Figure 5 illustrates the number of students who earned associate degrees from 2014 to 2020. These data were gathered through public institutional records submitted to the state Chancellor's office, which counts only one degree per student. Completion is often defined as attaining any academic goal, including certificates, degrees, and non-credit work (Harbour, 2018). However, certificates and non-credit work did not always include English composition as a requirement and were omitted from the data for this study. Figure 5 depicts the number of students completing at least one associate degree at Sand College from 2014 to 2020.

Figure 5

Number of students completing at least one associate degree at Sand College 2014–2020

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
■ Students Completing a Degree	786	779	904	1077	1137	1299
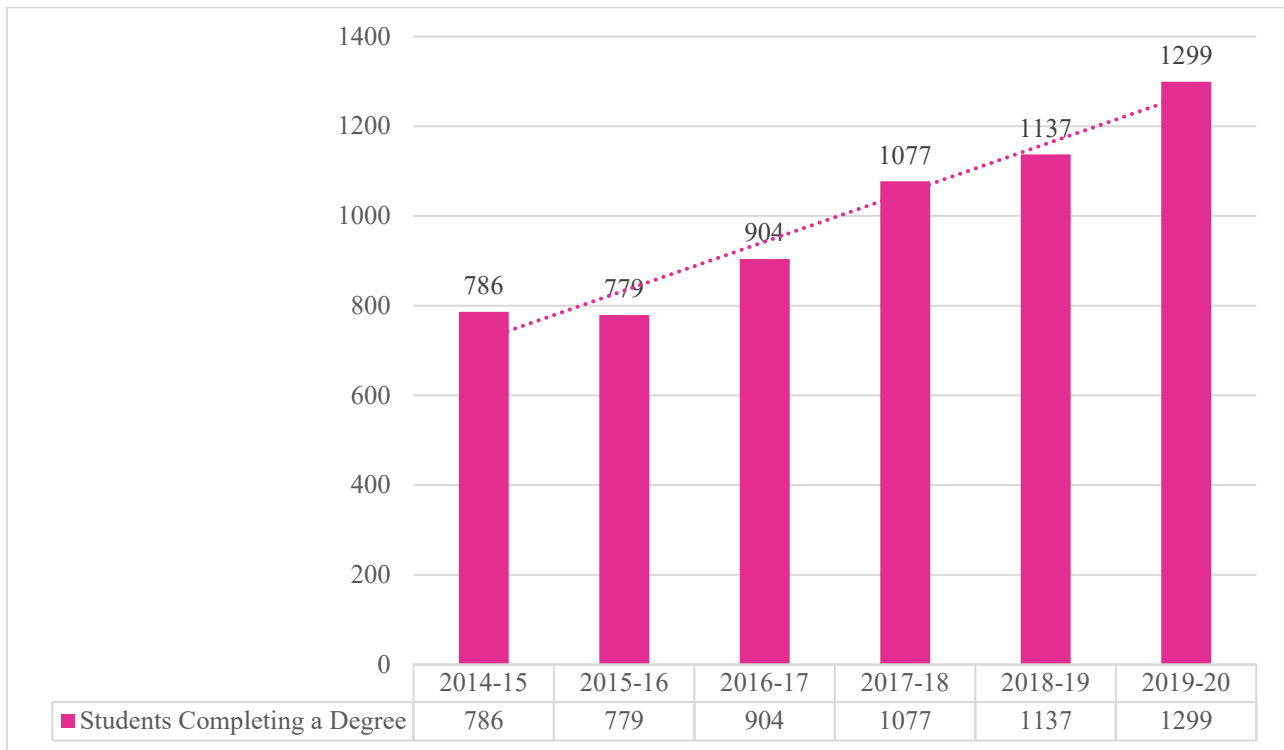
Figure 6 depicts Sand College's three-year completion rates. These rates were from a cohort study conducted by Sand College's institutional effectiveness office, which included students who were first-time freshmen, enrolled full-time, and seeking a degree from 2014 to 2020. Cohorts were identified in a fall term, and their outcomes were measured over three years. The completion rate was the percentage of students in the cohort who earned either a degree or certificate or who completed a two-year-equivalent transfer-preparatory program.

Figure 6

Completion Rates at Sand College 2014–2020

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
■ Completion Rates	19.30%	21.10%	22.20%	22.50%	29.10%	26.70%
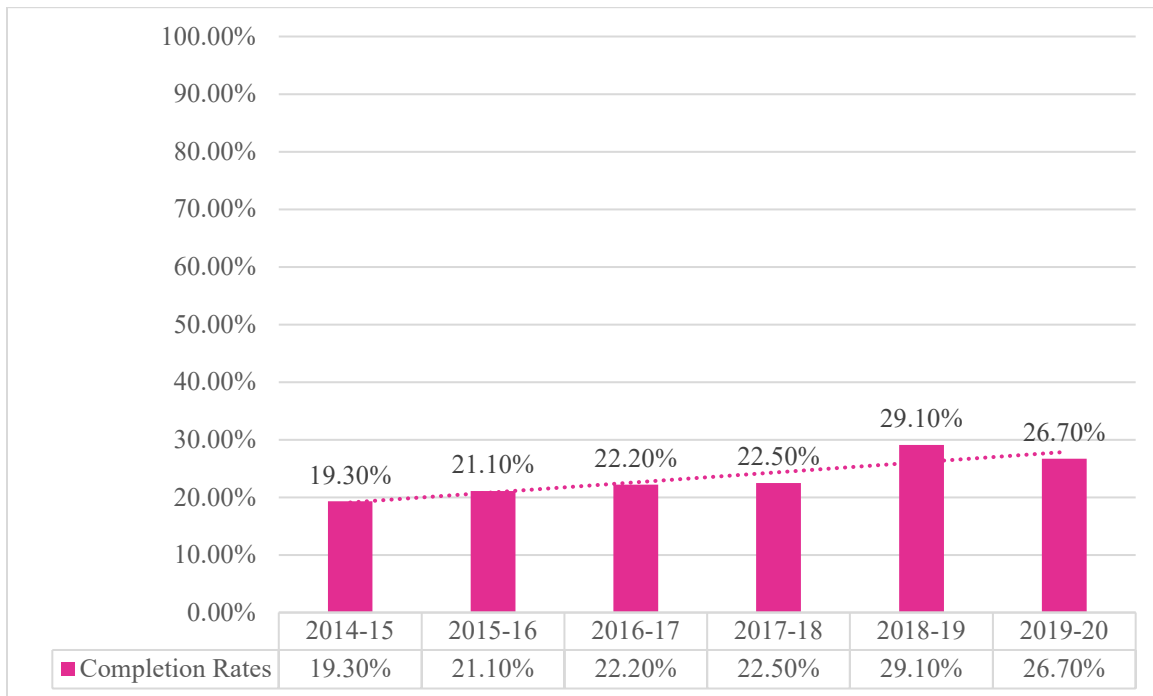
Note. Completion rates indicate the percentage of first-time full-time students who enrolled in the fall term who earned either a degree or certificate or who completed a two-year-equivalent transfer-preparatory program in three years.

Another intended outcome of placement reform and acceleration is increased overall completion (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2015; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011). Figure 5 indicates a consistent rise in the number of students earning degrees from 2014 to 2020. This rise is consistent with the observations of other studies on the number of students completing degrees when placement reform and acceleration are implemented at an institution (Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2015; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011). However, this researcher hesitates to attribute this rise in completion solely to placement reform or acceleration of English coursework. The

institution also accelerated mathematics coursework, which can be a significant barrier to completion (Hern, 2012).

Furthermore, Figure 6 shows an increase in overall completion rates for students at Sand College, which corresponds with the dates of changes in course sequencing and placement strategies at the college. There was a slight drop in completion rates in 2019–2020, but this corresponds with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and campus shutdowns. Completion rates indicate the number of students who attempt a program at an institution and who can complete it (Jaggars et al., 2015). Previous scholarship on acceleration and placement reform has found that completion rates tend to rise as these systems are reformed, which is consistent with what was found at Sand College.

Changes in Student Learning Outcome Mastery in English

At Sand College, the assessment of student learning outcome mastery in English composition is faculty-driven and guided by four student learning outcomes (SLOs). Each faculty member chooses an activity or assignment that directly reflects the assessed SLO. These assessments can vary widely from faculty member to faculty member, but they are guided by a three-scale rubric that notes if students exceeded, met, or did not meet the expectations of the SLOs. As Suskie (2018) described, this rubric's application reflects the specific assessment that measures the students' mastery of the individual SLO and is not tied to the course or assignment grades. Assessment data are collected in a repository that aggregates course and student information into a holistic overview of subject mastery based on SLOs using the aforementioned three-level scoring rubric.

The SLOs assessed in freshman composition at Sand College include the following:

SLO 1: Demonstrate process-driven writing, which includes drafting, revising, and editing

   strategies.

SLO 2: Compose logical, well-developed essays that clearly articulate a thesis supported by

   textual evidence and that demonstrate an awareness of the audience.

SLO 3: Apply critical reading strategies to the analysis of college-level texts.

SLO 4: Evaluate sources in the service of an argument while accurately documenting sources in

   MLA and/or APA style.

These SLOs were written by the Sand College English faculty as a set of core goals that indicate subject mastery in essential areas of freshman composition. Every year, each of the SLOs is assessed by faculty members through an assignment of their design. The results of these assessments are recorded in third-party software that hides instructor names, course numbers, and student names as a means of ensuring that assessment data are not used to evaluate instructors. This system creates veracity for the recorded data but prevents deeper analysis into the type of assessment administered and disaggregation of the data acquired. From 2014–2020, over 6,000 students enrolled in freshman composition. Almost all students were assessed each year by adjunct and full-time faculty members in English.

Figure 8 depicts the assessment values recorded by the faculty for SLO 1. Faculty members assessed students as "Exceeds expectations," "Meets expectations," or "Does not meet expectations" through individually designed assessment tools.

Figure 7

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who

Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO 1
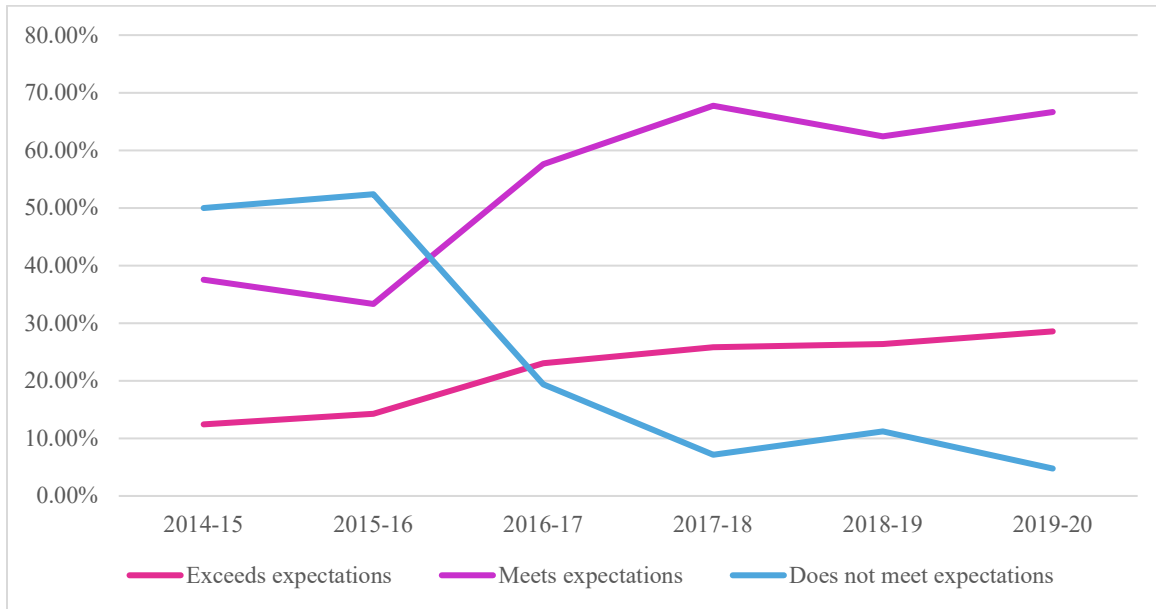
Note. SLO 1 is "Demonstrate process-driven writing that includes drafting, revising, and editing strategies."

The first SLO showed an overall increase in faculty members identifying students' work as exceeding or meeting expectations as placement reforms and acceleration measures were established from 2016 to 2020. Table 9 depicts the assessment values recorded by the faculty for SLO 2. Faculty members assessed students as "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," or "does not meet expectations" through individually designed assessment tools.

Figure 8

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who
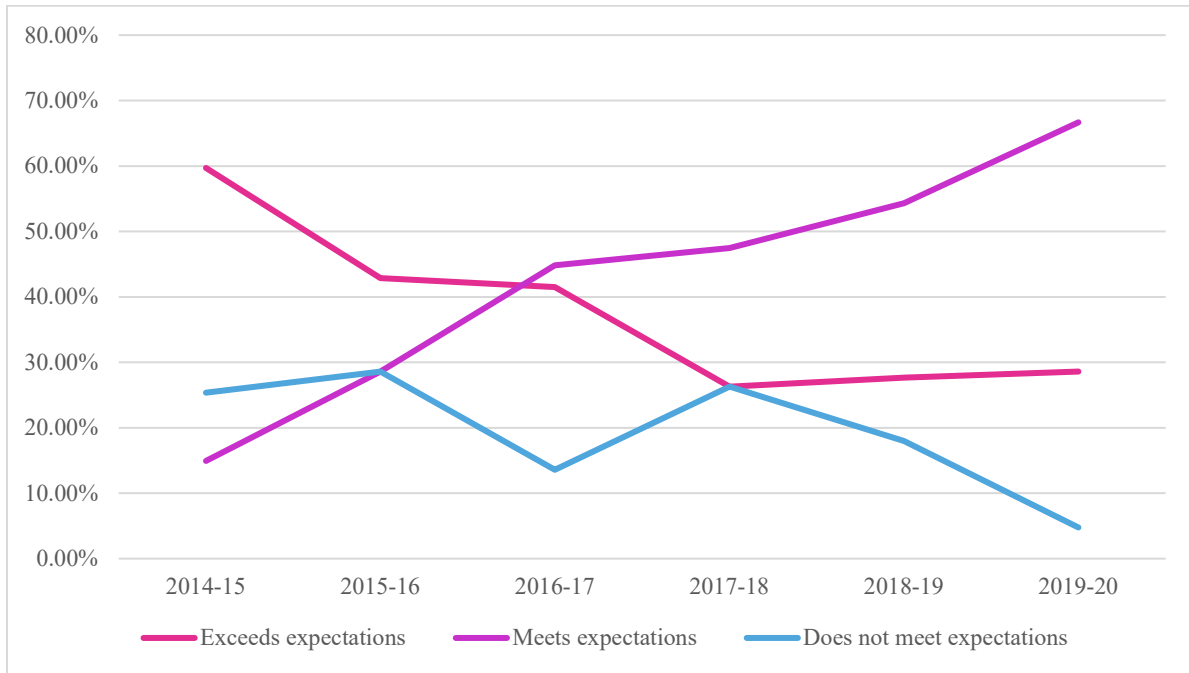
Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO2

Note. SLO 2 is "Compose logical, well-developed essays that clearly articulate a thesis

supported by textual evidence and that demonstrate an awareness of audience."

For SLO 2, the percentage of students assessed as exceeding expectations dropped, as

accelerated coursework in English became the norm at the college. There was a steady increase

in students assessed as meeting expectations for this SLO. There was a general downward trend

of students not meeting expectations. Interestingly, in 2019, when both multiple measures

placement and acceleration were implemented in full, the percentage of students in both the

exceeds and meets categories rose.

Figure 10 depicts the assessment values recorded by the faculty for SLO 3. Faculty members assessed students as "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," or "does not meet expectations" through individually designed assessment tools.

Figure 9

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO 3
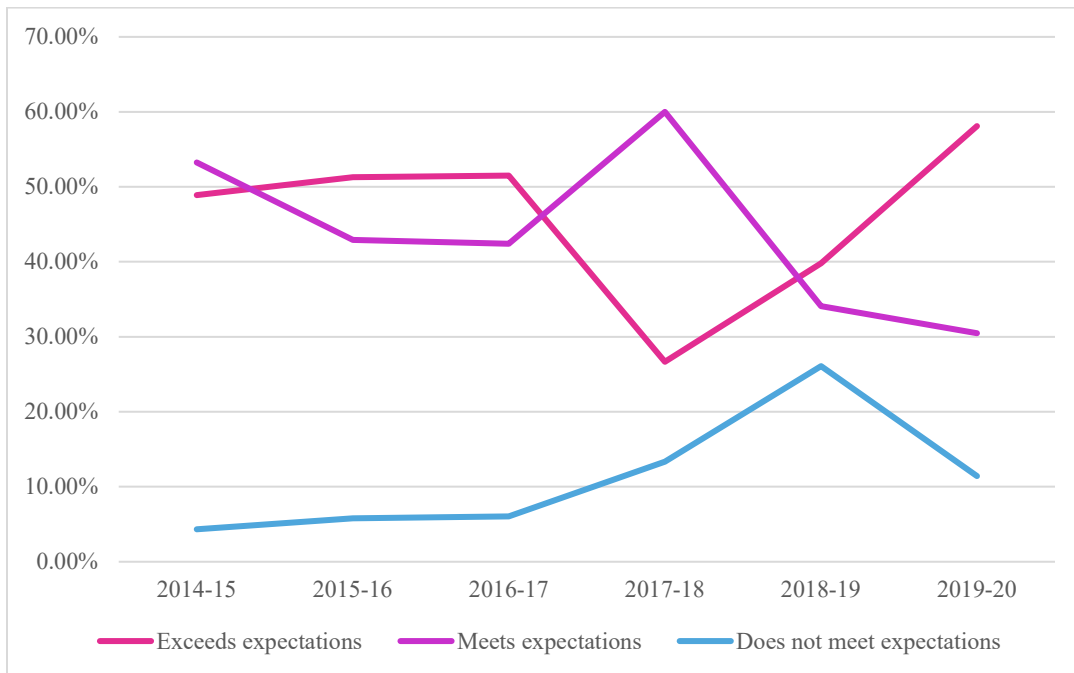

Note. SLO 3 is "Apply critical reading strategies to the analysis of college-level texts."

The data from SLO 3 were less consistent than for the previous two SLOs. Overall, this particular SLO demonstrated a more consistent assessment of students' mastery of this goal in the "exceeds and meets expectations" range. However, 2017–18 showed a drop in the exceeds category.

Figure 11 depicts the assessment values recorded by the faculty for SLO 4. Faculty members assessed students as "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," or "does not meet expectations" through individually designed assessment tools.

Figure 10

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO 4
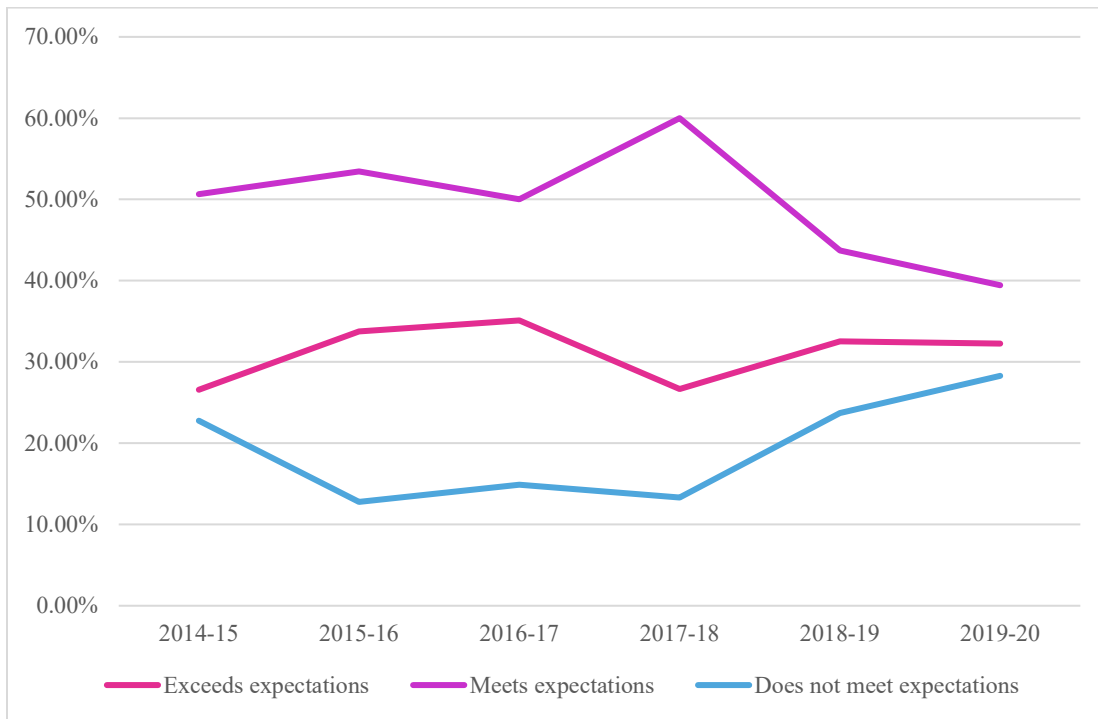
Note. SLO 4 is "Evaluate sources in the service of an argument while accurately documenting sources in MLA and/or APA style."

The assessment of this SLO shows a net rise in students exceeding expectations and students not meeting expectations.

Figure 12 displays the students who "did not meet expectations" for each of the SLOs.

Figure 11

Percentage of Students who did not meet SLO Expectations Completing Freshman Composition

Courses from 2014 to 2020

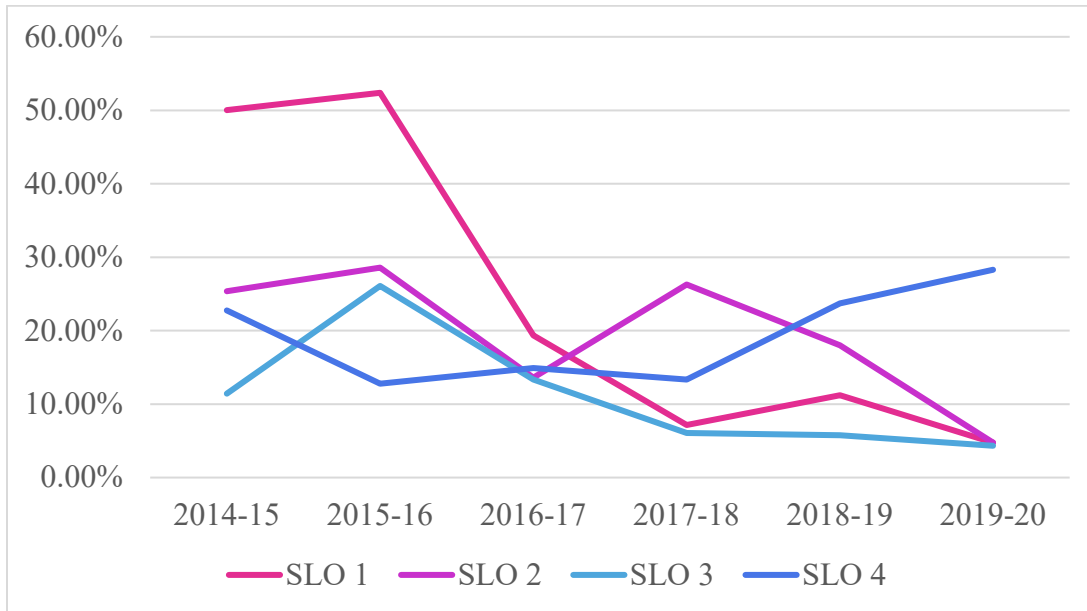Overall, based on faculty-driven assessments of SLOs from the introductory English course, there is little evidence to suggest that students failed to master critical subject skills under placement reforms and acceleration. Furthermore, this institution was found to have few measures to ensure consistency in assessment, which rendered the evaluation of SLOs a subjective practice that could vary from instructor to instructor. Additionally, due to standards ensuring that faculty members are not penalized for assessment data, a more detailed look at the assessment used was not possible. On the one hand, this protection for faculty privacy could ensure that the data presented here were more trustworthy than assessment tied to their names, as faculty members did not need to fear any repercussions. However, the lack of specificity severely limited the inability to look at more discrete elements of assessment or disaggregated data.

Faculty and Counselor Perceptions of Placement Reform and Acceleration

At Sand College, 45 adjunct and 12 full-time English faculty members and 17 counselors were invited to participate in a survey on acceleration and placement reform at the institution. The purpose of the survey was to gauge respondents' perceptions of placement reform and acceleration and how they influenced student persistence, completion, and subject mastery. Of those invited, 23 responded, including 16 English faculty members and seven counselors directly connected to placement. Of the faculty members, eight were full-time and eight were adjunct faculty members (see Appendix B).   This was a 31% response rate and proved sufficient in generating meaningful analysis.

Perceptions Compared to Institutional Rates of Persistence, Completion, and Subject Mastery

When surveyed, 23 respondents used a Likert scale to indicate how they perceived students to persist after placement reform and acceleration measures taking root at the institution. Figure 11 shows how participants responded when asked about their views on student persistence.

Figure 12

Perception of Student Persistence under Acceleration and Placement Reform
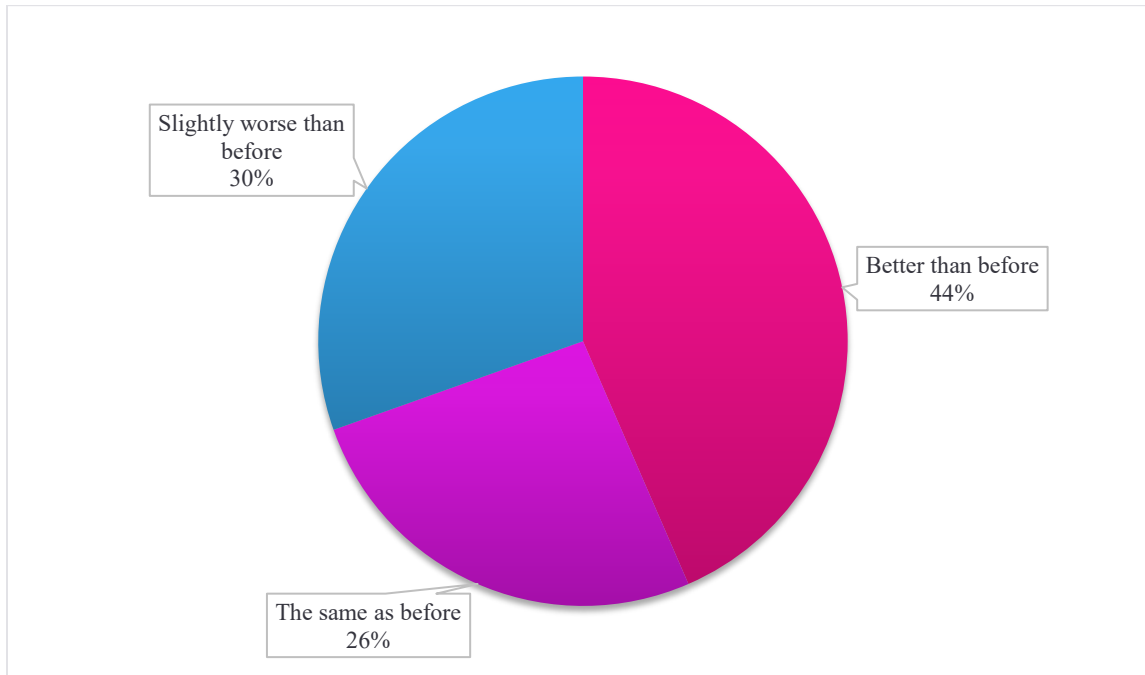
Overall, the perceptions of persistence compared to the institutionally reported persistence rates were analogous. As shown in Figure 11, 44% of respondents indicated that they thought students were persisting "better than before." However, 26% of respondents who indicated they perceived persistence to be "the same as before" were closer to the reported rates of student persistence.

When asked about their perceptions of the number of students completing freshman composition, 23 respondents indicated the following observations in Figure 12.

Figure 13

Perception of Student Completion under Acceleration and Placement Reform
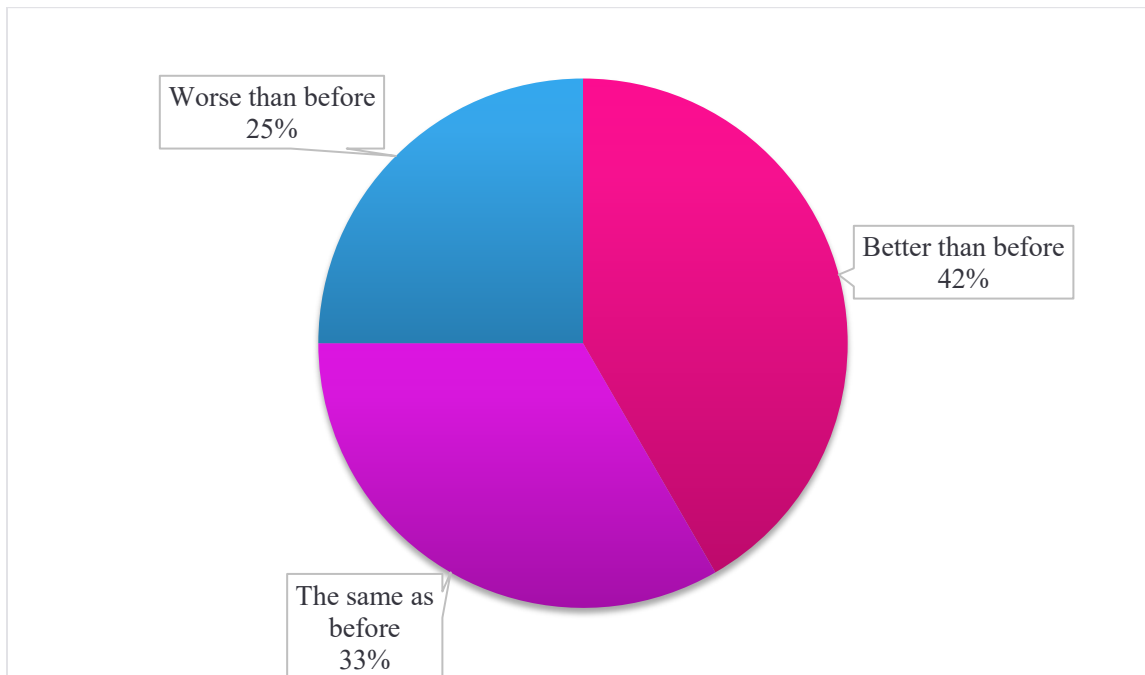
As shown in Figure 12, 42% of respondents indicated that they felt students were completing their programs of study at a higher rate than before; changes were made to the placement and course sequencing. This perception accurately reflected the institutional trend of an increase in associate degree completion.

Figure 12 illustrates the 23 responses from counselors and faculty, revealing their perceptions about how students are mastering English under acceleration and placement reform compared to the previous system. Figure 13 illustrates the reported perceptions of student subject mastery in English.

Figure 14

Perception of Student Subject Mastery in English under Acceleration and Placement Reform
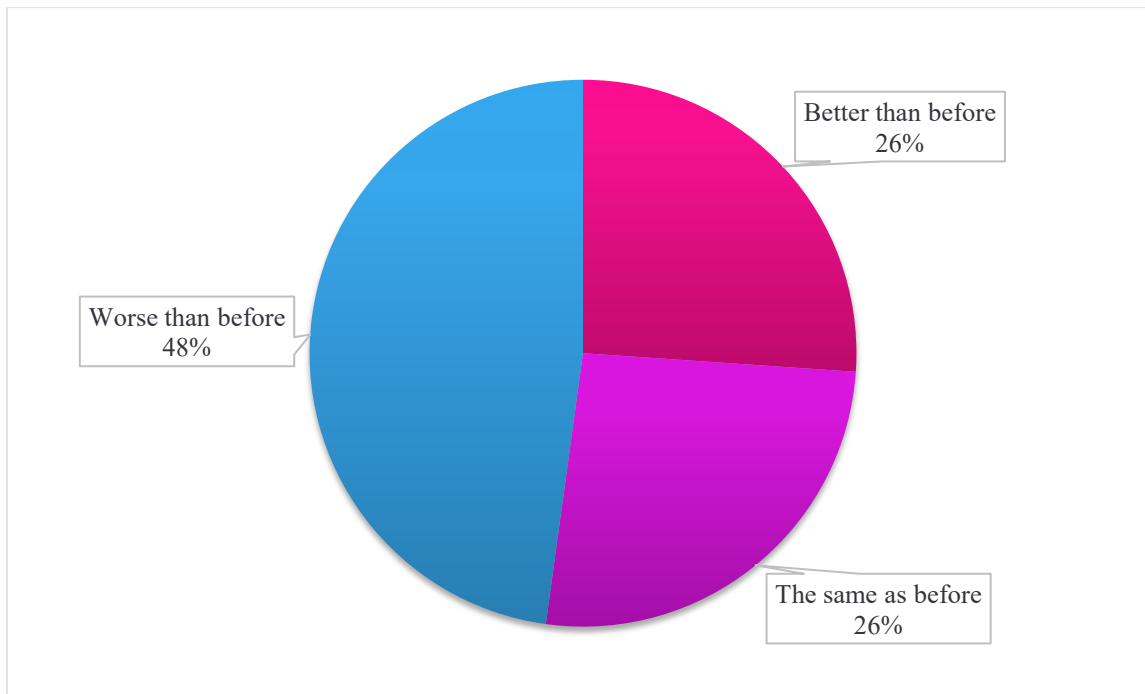
The majority of respondents indicated that they perceived students as performing "worse than before." However, when compared against the subject mastery data gleaned from student learning outcome assessment values, the perception that students are performing the "same as before" or "slightly better than before" is a more accurate observation of how students were mastering the subject of English after acceleration and placement reform.

Perceptions of Student Learning Outcome Mastery

When asked about individual student learning outcomes, faculty members noted that they perceived students to be performing less well in these learning goals than before the placement reform and acceleration measures had been enacted at Sand College. Figure 14 shows 16 responses from part-time and full-time English teachers and their perceptions of how students are performing regarding specific student learning outcomes. Counselors were excluded from the

questions using skip logic, as they would have had little to no context for answering.

Respondents were offered the option of "students never achieve this goal" and "I don't know,"

but no one chose these responses, so these items were omitted from the following figures.

Figure 15

Faculty Perceptions of Student Performance on SLO 1 Before and After Placement Reform and

Acceleration
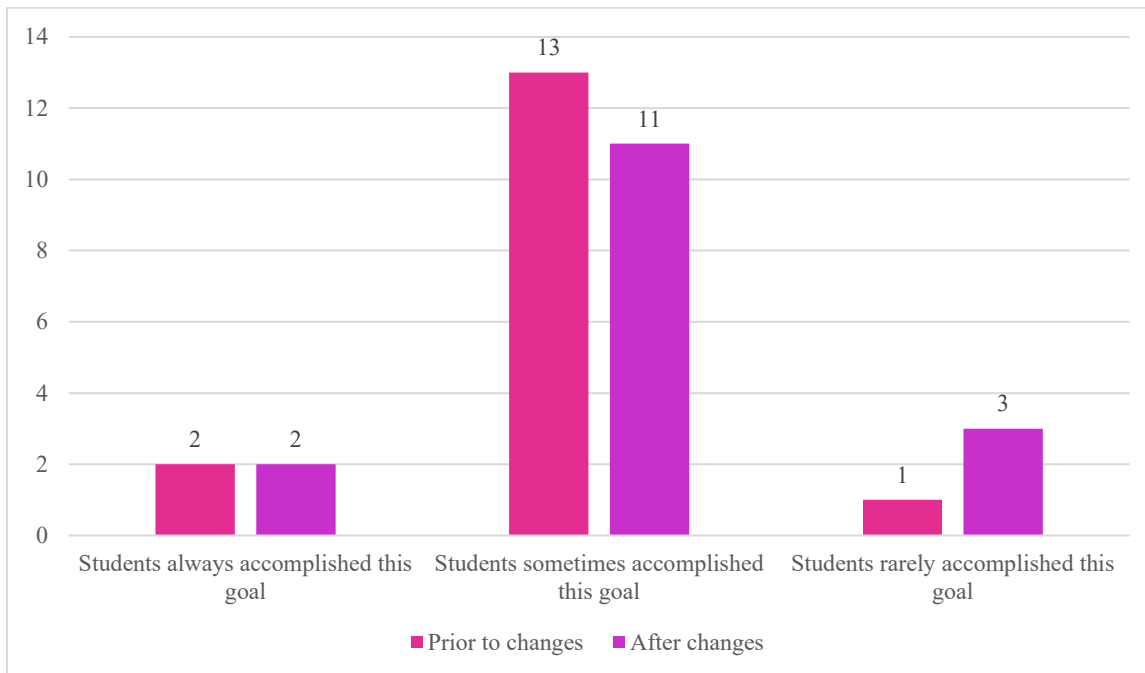
SLO 1 calls on students to "Demonstrate process-driven writing that includes drafting,

revising, and editing strategies." Based on the responses, faculty members perceived students as

performing less well on this SLO than before placement reform and acceleration changes. This

was one of the more positively perceived student learning outcomes and one of the more

frequently met goals based on assessment values based on institutional data. While 55% of

respondents indicated that they perceived "students sometimes accomplished this goal,"

institutional data from the SLO assessment indicate that students' actual ratings were much higher.

Figure 15 shows the faculty responses to the same question as Figure 15 but on SLO 2.

Figure 16

Faculty Perceptions of Student Performance on SLO 2 Before and After Placement Reform and Acceleration
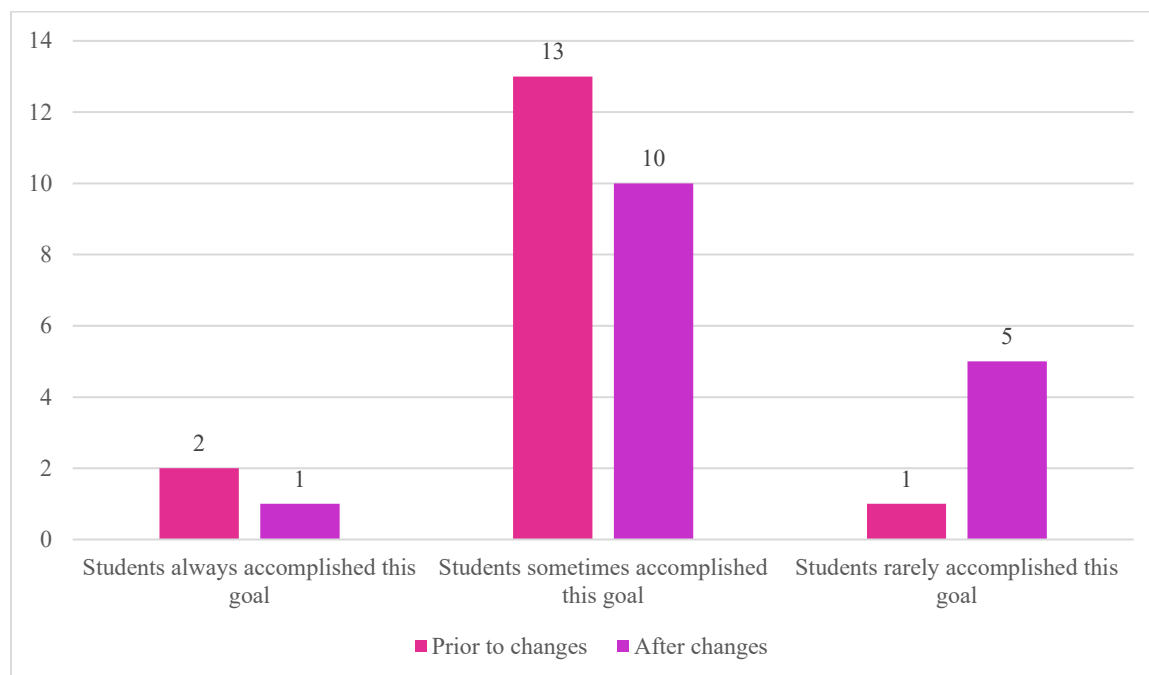
SLO 2 is "Compose logical, well-developed essays that clearly articulate a thesis supported by textual evidence and that demonstrate an awareness of audience." The perception data indicated that most faculty members believed "students sometimes accomplish this goal." However, like the previous SLO, the gauge of perceptions of student mastery of this goal showed that faculty members felt students were doing worse than before placement/acceleration reform, which is not supported by the institutional data.

Figure 16 shows the faculty responses the same question on SLO 3.

Figure 16

Faculty perceptions of student performance on SLO 3 before and after placement reform and acceleration

Figure 17

Faculty Perceptions of Student Performance on SLO 3 Before and After Placement Reform and Acceleration
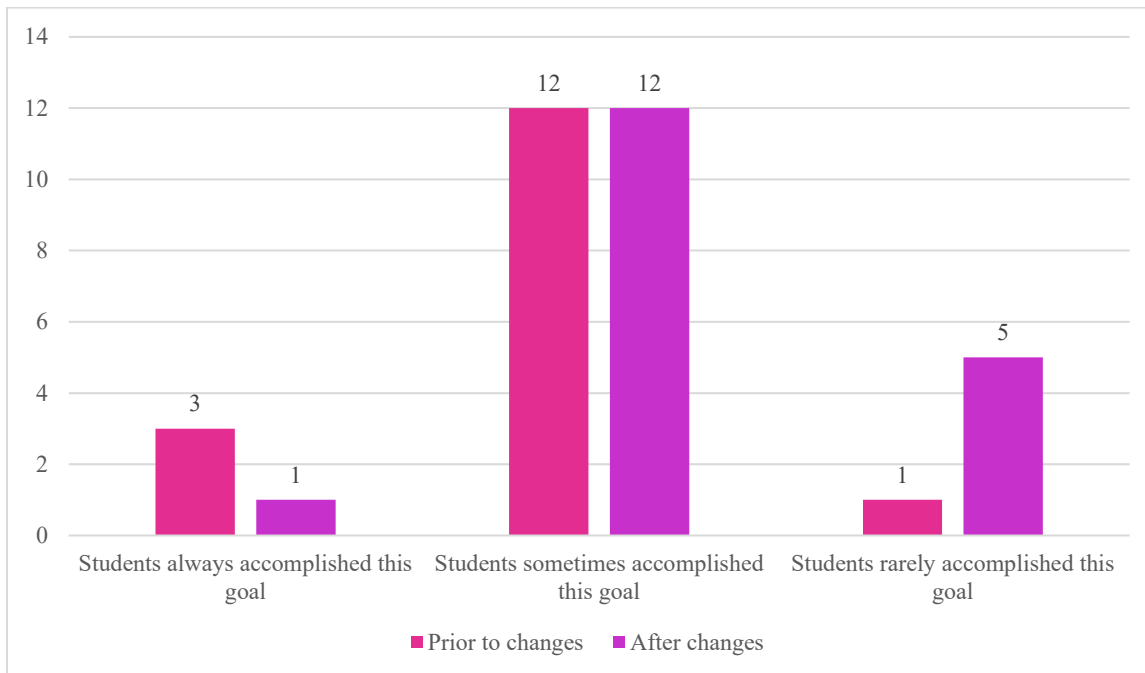
SLO 3 is "Apply critical reading strategies to the analysis of college-level texts." Faculty members indicated a perception that "students sometimes accomplish this goal." Overall, faculty members seemed to find that students performed consistently before and after placement reform and acceleration measures regarding this student learning outcome. The institutional data for this SLO were the least consistent, so few comparisons could be drawn. However, the perception held by some faculty members that students were performing markedly worse in achieving this goal does not match the institutional data. Indeed, many faculty members reported that students

"rarely accomplish this goal" after changes in placement and acceleration, but assessment data showed that students most often met or exceeded expectations in this category. Figure 17 asks faculty respondents the same questions on SLO 4.

Figure 18

Faculty Perceptions of Student Performance on SLO 4 Before and After Placement Reform and Acceleration
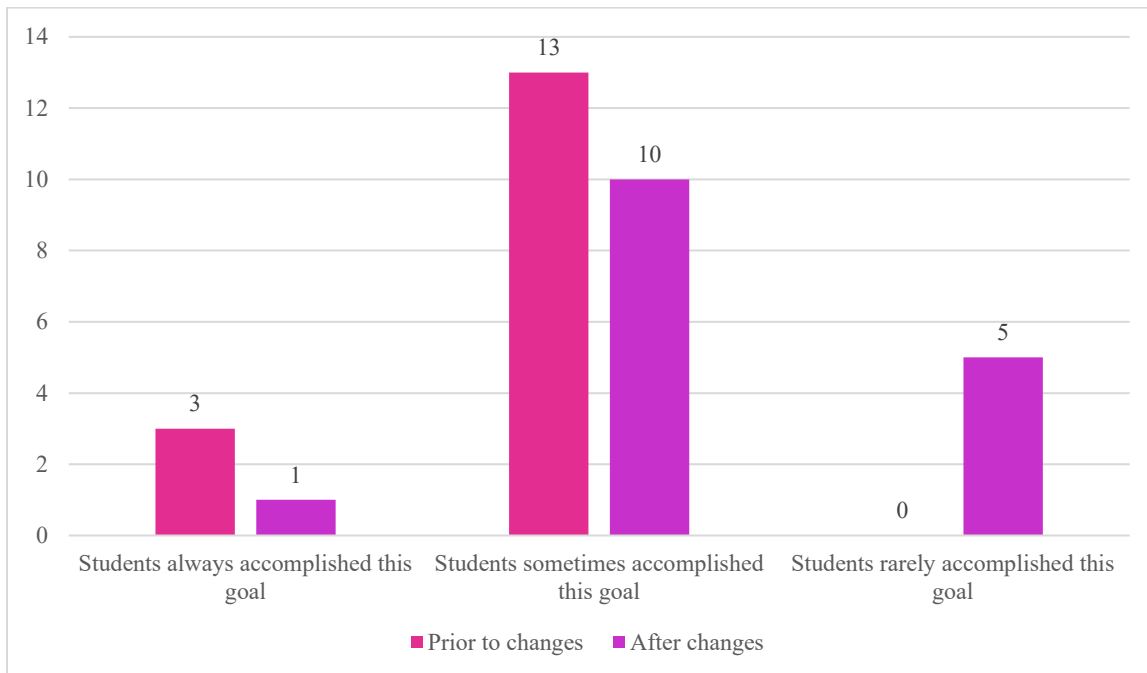
SLO 4 is "Evaluate sources in the service of an argument while accurately documenting sources in MLA and/or APA style." Compared to the institutional data on this SLO, instructors perceived their students as "sometimes accomplishing this goal." This was the only SLO in which faculty members perceived students to perform worse than before the placement and course sequencing changes. However, institutional data do not show that students are performing worse when they are assessed.

Overall, the faculty perceptions of subject-level mastery through SLO assessment appeared to be slightly divergent from the institutional data. For every SLO, faculty members perceived students as performing less well than they did before placement reform and acceleration. However, the institutional assessment data did not indicate a loss in subject-level mastery over the period accompanying placement and acceleration reform. Faculty members seemed to assume that their students were not accomplishing the goals of a course, but assessment data showed otherwise.

Thematic Coding of Open-ended Survey Responses

Through thematic coding of the open-ended responses regarding perceptions of student performance, several vital ideas began to emerge (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). First, the data were organized with open-ended responses isolated from the rest of the survey and separated into discrete documents based on each question. Second, the data were thoroughly read several times, with recurrent themes identified. This produced five main themes regarding perceptions of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College: (a) detachment from the changes in placement reform and acceleration; (b) distrust in data; (c) student success encompassing more than numbers; (d) skepticism and perceived lowering of standards; and (e) the need to offer more support.

Detachment from the Changes in Placement Reform and Acceleration

One of the key themes that emerged from the open-ended survey questions indicated a lack of agency by faculty and counselors in decisions made in developing policies at Sand College regarding placement reform and accelerating English coursework. The responses related to this theme from Sand faculty and counselors suggested that the K–12 system, legislation changes, counselors, and underprepared educators were the primary barriers to implementing

70

placement reform and acceleration. Faculty members, in particular, seemed to perceive that they were not included in the decision process of transitioning to multiple-measure placement and ending remediation. No respondents indicated that they perceived their involvement in the change as satisfactory. When asked their thoughts on whether placement reform and acceleration had been a positive change at Sand College, many respondents pointed to entities outside of their areas, such as other departments, administration, and legislators, as factors for the perceived flaws in the transition, suggesting that faculty and counselors felt no control over these changes.

Some noted that they perceived outside entities, such as legislators and administrators, as the driving factor of placement reform and acceleration. However, they pointed out that this excluded subject matter experts.

> *Throughout the entire transition to the new "placement" model at [Sand College], English faculty were not consulted or asked of our professional, subject-matter expertise. This exclusion of subject-matter-expert faculty in the decision to shift to multiple-measures assessment and to all but eliminate developmental education is not the fault of COD administrators, however. The mandates and law came down from the state legislature and from the state Chancellor's Office, and college leadership was simply following the rules set before it.*

One respondent pointed to an internal breakdown of communication that left them unsure of how multiple measures of placement were enacted at the institution.

> *I think Counseling has been very cryptic about how they use [multiple measures]—these are supposed to be decided upon in consultation with discipline faculty, but that has not been done at [Sand College] ever very well. We also still do not have our self-placement*

guidelines widely published, for students are relying on Counseling to share these—are

they? Not sure.

The high school system was repeatedly noted as a barrier to student preparedness and subsequent subject-level mastery, as found in the following observations from faculty members. However, these sentiments were not echoed in comments by the counselors' responses.

I don't know where the answer actually lies. High school? College level? In general,

depending on where they completed high school, many students seem pretty unprepared

to handle the English requirements when they enter [Sand College].

Students coming from schools that do not emphasize basic writing skills (clearly 70 to 80

percent of [Sand College] incoming freshmen per AccuPlacer) do poorly when placed in

freshman composition, that is, unless they are passed on through as they were in high

school

.

The problem is in K through 12, not the community college. As long as K–12 teaches

English composition so poorly, students will need a basic skills class. This is true of math

as well.

High school GPA scores may not accurately reflect actual skill levels and abilities at each

course level.

Furthermore, seven faculty responses specifically pointed to English instructors as perceived impediments to successfully implementing placement reform and acceleration at the institution.

I think that instructor bias & previous educational inequities are highlighted. Students who previously had a strong English background are seen as the "right" students for a class, while those who may have gaps in their education or did not previously achieve mastery were seen as the "remedial" group.

Honestly, I don't think the issue is student mastery, but rather faculty adaptation. Many instructors are not willing to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of their students, & so they have a perception of students as "not prepared."

Overall, this theme suggests an overarching perception of detachment from implementing changes in placement reform and acceleration. In the open-ended questions, half of the faculty and counselor respondents provided replies that were themed as detached from institutional changes in placement reform and acceleration.

Distrust in Data

The next common theme is a general distrust of data or the need for more data. Previously and consistently published institutional data show an increase in student persistence and completion. However, the perceptions indicated by open-ended responses denote that these data were not sufficient or clear enough for faculty and counselors to instill confidence in the changes made in placement and acceleration. The responses coded to this theme were most often accompanied by replies to the close-ended Likert scale questions that indicated respondents were unsure if completion, persistence, or subject mastery rates had changed.

I don't think we have enough data yet to really know if this is positive or not (at [Sand College] or across the system).

I think the data are still too sparse, and I think it has been for several years, as we will also need to look at last year and this year (and maybe next year) through the lens of the pandemic as well. It was hard to assess why students didn't succeed during these very challenging times.

An overarching desire for additional data indicates that nine respondents were not sure how placement reform and acceleration affected the campus despite data being published on a semester basis on the school website, presentations, and committee reports.

I do worry that our most vulnerable and underprepared students are being pushed to get into college comp and math when we know they will fail. But without data, this is a worry more than it is fact. I want to see data showing high school GPA > other multiple measures used > retention rates > success rates. Without this, we are just guessing.

I don't really know if a student has mastered a subject, but I don't recall seeing more Ds or Fs in English since placement reform. You would think that since so many students used to assess into [remedial English courses], there would be an extremely low pass rate for students going directly into [freshman composition], but that does not appear to be the case.

Two respondents indicated incredulity that published institutional data accurately and reliably measured student success.

I am not sure if what the numbers say in English can be trusted (in terms of success and attrition). Is there really no difference?

I suspect that if the "data" show that it really does not matter if they precede freshman

composition with a basic skills class that focuses on writing, not writing and reading,

then the answer is not in their success at learning, but grade inflation by English

"educators" with no basic skills composition background.

One respondent's simple indication of a need for additional data sums up this theme well.

The data is lacking.

Student Success Encompasses More than Numbers

When asked for their overarching thoughts about placement reform and acceleration, the focus of 10 of the responses centered on measures of student success outside of persistence, completion, and subject-level mastery. There was a pronounced perception of increased student morale and self-esteem; that is, students were perceived to be more confident in their abilities under placement reform and acceleration. These responses were often preceded by an indication that the respondents were unsure of whether students were achieving subject mastery, but that they felt the overall student experience was improved through placement reform and acceleration.

Six of the counselors and faculty members specifically suggested that acceleration and placement reform positively changed students' mentality and self-esteem. Furthermore, such respondents referred to placement reform and acceleration as being beneficial to students financially and in terms of advancing equity.

I think it removes barriers and stigma for students.

I lean toward acceleration because I have noticed that it does no good—spiritually,

emotionally, mentally, or physically—to keep students in remedial work.

It has given students more self-empowerment to participate in their placement, which has built confidence and therefore success.

Students with greater financial needs benefit most from reform because they might be able to get through the system in a decent amount of time. Most in such circumstances have to work and support families, so every extra class impacts the likelihood of completion.

Students of color, in particular, at our institution have felt more enabled to succeed rather than be tracked at a lower "level," which can very easily contribute to self-diminishment and therefore lower success rates.

One respondent suggested other metrics for gauging student success through additional partnerships with transfers and interdisciplinary input. This respondent noted that perceptions from disciplines outside of English could be more helpful in judging the success of placement reform and acceleration.

I almost feel it would be better to survey those outside of the English Dept. (in a discipline that requires longer written assignments) as to whether they have witnessed a decline in citation, essay organization, reading comprehension, etc.

However, others indicated a general fear that condensed coursework could increase completion but could hurt students in other ways. Four of these responses acknowledged positive changes in completion but predicted potential issues for students. These responses argued that students need to be tracked further to ensure the institution fulfills its mission. Notable responses emphasized

that a student's experience at Sand College is not the end of their academic or professional journey.

Yes, it is positive to move students through faster by taking fewer classes to graduate and, of course, more graduate. However, we don't do them any favors by shortchanging them. The degrees today are not as highly regarded as they were in the past. That is unfortunate.

Students are moving through the system faster now because they are required to take fewer classes to graduate and transfer. However, are they adequately prepared? I took four math classes to graduate—but I never would have been prepared to pass the transferable level without that remediation. Are students adequately prepared now?

Students with lower-level English abilities might get frustrated and drop out, or may simply eek by and then fail when they transfer to a four-year college.

Skepticism and Perceived Lowering of Standards

One of the overarching themes present in the English faculty responses was a distinct skepticism surrounding placement reform and acceleration changes. These responses relayed lived experiences and denoted a general mistrust of institutional data.

Many students lacked the background knowledge, discipline, and desire to achieve success in college-level writing.

I have exponentially more unprepared students coming into [freshman composition] after [acceleration and placement reform] and exponentially more students who utterly lack the skills to succeed and who need remedial instruction.

77

I would say that roughly one third of my students are not really able to write intelligible sentences or read college-level materials. I think these students would benefit from developmental coursework. Acceleration doesn't seem to actually accelerate their path to completion since many of them will need to retake the course in order to master the material.

Before acceleration, I would get perhaps one or two students in an English 001A class whose skills were so poor that they had no chance of success. After acceleration, that rate has tripled or quadrupled. In my [freshman composition] classes at least, drop rates have gone up, and successful completion rates have gone down.

One respondent noted that their freshman composition success rates remained consistent due to the additional support they offered.

I know that students fall by the wayside; I don't know whether it's because they weren't able to do what they were supposed to do in [freshman composition], or if they were not ready for it. Most of my students succeed, but I feel that in part it is because in addition to the [freshman composition] goals, I still do individual work with students that can be quite intensive.

There was an overarching subtheme of the lowering of persistence, completion, and subject mastery standards as changes in placement reform and acceleration took hold; that is, the respondents believed that overarching standards have been lowered, which has led to increases in student success measures. This subtheme was present in half of the responses. The general feeling was that the data reflecting positive changes or no changes in persistence, completion, and subject mastery could be ascribed to an inadvertent lowering of expectations by English

faculty, which echoes many of the criticisms of these reform movements (Humphreys, 2012). These comments were most often connected with responses suggesting that placement reform and acceleration are not positive changes.

> *The premise that basic skills students do not benefit from basic skills level classes before freshman composition is not logical. I suspect that if the "data" show that it really does not matter if they precede freshman composition with a basic skills class that focuses on writing, not writing and reading, then the answer is not in their success at learning, but grade inflation by English "educators" with no basic skills composition background. As I have stated above, my grade point averages dropped precipitously after the institution of no assessment or required basic skills coursework. If the objective is merely increasing pass rates and not increasing skills, then I suppose that is success. If the objective is to prepare students as college-level writers, then [placement reform and acceleration] are a failure.*

> *These particular reforms have fundamentally changed freshman composition courses: because faculty are now teaching a larger number of students who lack the college-level reading and writing skills necessary to adequately engage with material in a transfer-level English composition course, what we assign students to read, write, and think about is less rigorous. Why? Well, when placement reform began to happen, and when students were bypassing developmental coursework that they would have been required to take before this reform, English faculty (including myself) were noticing that our students were unable to comprehend and engage with reading material that we had used successfully for many years. As a result, we found ourselves (whether consciously or not) replacing*

reading material with shorter, less complex, and less rigorous material. Also, we found

ourselves revising writing assignments in a similar way, as a result of our noticing

students' declining performance on written assignments. Is it possible that my colleagues

and I were operating on preconceived ideas about how placement reform would change

our classes, and is it possible that our "dumbing down" of the curriculum was

unnecessary? Sure. But I have found little to no evidence in my own classes that this has

primarily been the case.

These responses primarily show that lived experiences hold additional weight for faculty as they draw conclusions about the success of initiatives.

The Need to Offer more Support

The final theme that emerged from the thematic coding of open-ended responses was the need to provide students with additional support. Sand College practices placement reform and the acceleration of English coursework in an unencumbered form. As a result, there are no corequisites, embedded tutoring, or other support structures to assist students. The lack of these structures was mentioned repeatedly by respondents. None of the open-ended questions specifically asked for feedback on support structures or how placement reform and acceleration were implemented, but the majority of faculty members and counselors felt inspired to offer suggestions.

There is not adequate support for students who arrive unprepared for the rigors of

college-level English composition classes.

Each student is different in their level of knowledge and should be assisted as an

individual. Some need more remedial attention to prepare them to thrive.

80

>*Smaller classes! [Embedded tutors] for English in the classroom.*

The creation of corequisite coursework was offered as a suggestion for improvement by six faculty members.

>*I believe it could be effective if paired with corequisite courses. I feel we have not done enough to boost supports, which is a crucial step in the real implementation of [acceleration] policies.*

>*I really hope to see corequisites at [Sand College]. I have found that most of my students who used a decent amount of tutoring became adequate writers… Making such a service a mandatory part of the program might help.*

Two respondents noted the need to bolster the information offered to students so they can accurately place themselves in the coursework. These respondents were faculty members, not counselors.

>*Students are not given adequate, specific criteria to assess their current skills. Students are free to exaggerate their perceived abilities.*

>*Many times, students over-evaluate their strengths.*

The unsolicited recommendations for improving how placement reform and acceleration are implemented at the institution suggest a willingness among faculty members to be part of the process. These respondents may feel detached from the implementation, as noted by an earlier theme, but want to improve the perceived flaws within the system.

Summary of Chapter 4

  This chapter contains the findings of this study obtained through document analysis, institutional data, and survey results and connects the analysis back to the central research questions.

  First, the data gathered from institutional records to answer RQ2 indicate that placement reform and acceleration changes at Sand College yielded results consistent with previous scholarship. That is, persistence and completion increased when multiple measures of placement and accelerated English coursework were implemented (Hern, 2012; Nodine et al., 2013).

  Second, institutional data on student learning outcome assessment indicate some increases in subject mastery. Contrary to the commonly held beliefs documented in Chapter 2 that placement reform and acceleration lead to losses in subject mastery, the analysis of student learning outcome data at Sand College did not show this to be the case (Humphreys, 2012).

  Third, survey responses submitted by English faculty members and counselors indicate a general perception that placement reform and acceleration are negatively affecting the institution. Furthermore, through thematic coding, five main themes regarding perceptions of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College emerged: (a) detachment from the changes in placement reform and acceleration; (b) distrust in data; (c) the idea that student success encompasses the whole student; (d) skepticism and perceived lowering of standards; and (e) the need to offer more support. Each of these themes offers insight into how faculty and counselors perceive these institutional changes. They are all discussed further in Chapter 5.

  Fourth, a comparison of the perceptions gathered through the survey and data found in institutional records revealed a gap between perception and reality. Ultimately, faculty members and counselors perceived placement reform and acceleration as negatively affecting persistence,

completion, and subject mastery, while institutional data suggested otherwise. This gap between

perception and reality is typical of employees who feel disenfranchised by an initiative (Hail et

al., 2019). Chapter 5 offers additional discussion and recommendations based on these findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This work studied an institution's experiences with acceleration and placement reform in English coursework. Specifically, institutional data on persistence, completion, and subject mastery in English composition were explored through the assessment of student learning outcomes. This study compared the success of students indicated by institutional data with the perceptions of their success among faculty and counselors gathered through a Likert-scale survey coupled with thematically coded responses to open-ended questions. It aimed to gauge points of view surrounding acceleration and placement reform in English. Potential increases in persistence and completion were accompanied by a pervading sense of loss in subject-level mastery. Overall, this study serves as a starting point for additional analysis of subject mastery in English and the engagement of faculty and counselors under placement reform and acceleration.

This chapter includes a discussion of findings related to the literature on placement reform, acceleration, and subject mastery through student learning outcome assessment and on the significance of perception when implementing changes at an institution. Also included is a discussion on connections to the conflict theory of education and opportunities to better bridge the gap between the intent of an initiative and its unintended impact on students. Recommendations based on findings are offered to aid in the implementation of placement reform and acceleration at other institutions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a summary.

This chapter is centered on discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What acceleration and placement reform strategies in English were implemented at the institution from Fall 2016 to Spring 2020?

RQ2: In what ways did student persistence and completion change during this time?

RQ3: In what ways did student-learning outcome mastery in English change during this time?

RQ4: What are faculty and counselor perceptions of the influence of acceleration and placement

reform in English on student persistence, completion, and subject mastery?

RQ5: How do these perceptions compare to actual rates of persistence, completion, and subject

mastery?

Interpretation of the Findings

This study found that Sand College was consistent with other studies in terms of increasing or maintaining persistence and completion under placement reform and acceleration (Adams et al., 2009; Edgecome, 2011; Hern, 2012; Jaggars et al., 2014). In addition, the findings from a six-year longitudinal analysis of student learning outcome data suggested that there was no substantial loss of subject mastery under placement reform and acceleration. However, the perceptions of placement reform and acceleration found through survey data and thematic coding showed concerns from English faculty and counselors consistent with criticisms of the movement found in the literature (Almy, 2017; Jaschik, 2011). These responses were primarily focused on a lack of involvement by faculty, concerns over material loss, and a lack of preparation of students. Overall, placement reform and acceleration were perceived as problematic initiatives at Sand College, while institutional data did not support this perception.

Easing the Conflict and Supporting the Literature

The data generated in response to RQs 1 and 2 supported the existing literature that multiple measures placement and acceleration of English coursework had increased persistence and completion (Hern, 2012; Kuo, 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011). At Sand College, condensing and accelerating English course sequences had an association between increased

persistence and completion when a remediated course was removed from student requirements. Furthermore, over the period during which multiple-measure placement was implemented, an additional increase in persistence and completion was evident.

However, at Sand College, dramatic increases in completion by marginalized ethnicities and lower socio-economic groups were not present in the findings (Hern, 2012; Kuo, 2014; Rutschow & Schnieder, 2011). This suggests that the tension between the purpose of the community college in providing social mobility through education and measures that prevent access to education may not be as prevalent at Sand College. However, this does not imply that previous scholarship observing the easing of this tension is unreliable. Indeed, this merely reminds this researcher that there is a possible opportunity to increase completion rates for marginalized socioeconomic and ethnic groups through further study and analysis and targeted efforts to support these groups.

Subject Mastery through Student Learning Outcome Assessment and Perception

The rates of students meeting freshman composition's student learning outcomes remained broadly consistent during the period when courses were accelerated and remediation was no longer required at Sand College. However, two outcomes showed some improvement in students meeting or exceeding expectations. Thus, there was no indication of a widespread quality shortfall or loss of skills gained by students, as was suggested by criticism of placement reform and acceleration found in the literature (Humphreys, 2012; Jaschik, 2011).

However, some perceptions from the English faculty suggested that students were not performing as well as they had before placement reform and acceleration measures were in place. Interestingly, the data generated by both the faculty perception survey and the student learning outcome assessment came from the English faculty of Sand College. In general, faculty

members indicated that students were not achieving the course goals as well as they had before the acceleration and placement reform. Yet, they submitted formal assessment results, noting that students performed the same as or better than before the reform. This could be suggestive of the recurrent coded theme of "pessimism and perceived lowering of standards." More than half of the faculty members noted a sense of disbelief that students could accomplish the goals of freshman composition and an overarching easing of standards based on the students' ostensible skills in English. This theme echoes many of the criticisms of placement reform and acceleration from dissenters of this movement, who suggest that compromising academic rigor is inevitable under these changes (Humphreys, 2012; Jaschik, 2011).

At Sand College, institutional data on subject mastery through student-learning outcome assessment centers on four key course goals. These goals are established by campus subject-matter experts and assessed against a common rubric through individually chosen assessment activities. Nevertheless, prior research indicates that, despite being consistent and faculty-driven, this type of student-learning outcome assessment does not produce the most meaningful data on subject mastery (Suskie, 2018; Tiffany et al., 1991). These authors contend that without a common or accessible assessment tool, the institutional data on student learning outcomes do not reliably indicate subject mastery in the same way that grades do not. Essentially, research suggests that without updated assessment practices that allow for common norming, a single assessment tool, and disaggregation of data, subject mastery through student-learning outcome assessment provides a less holistic view of student performance in coursework than otherwise intended (Shavelson, 2007; Suskie, 2018.

The Importance of Perception

Through Likert-scale survey data, many respondents shared their perceptions that students were doing less well in persistence, completion, and subject mastery than was reflected in student-learning outcome data. This contradicts institutional data that indicated students were doing just as well, if not better than, before acceleration and placement reform changes. Prior research (Totaro et al., 2011) has found that the power of lived experiences and perception can frequently override concrete institutional data. This study, like others, illustrates the necessity of quantifying perceptions to compare them with the data realities of an initiative. However, simply saying that a group's perceptions are not correct is not enough to bring stakeholders on board with institutional change (Hail et al., 2019; Totaro et al., 2011). Instead, stakeholders should explore their perceptions of institutional data and offer their input meaningfully to feel connected to initiatives (Paulson, 2012). In the case of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College, counselors and English faculty members have access to institutional data and have now had the chance to share their perceptions, but the application of their input has not been published. Indeed, without this study, the perceptions of faculty members and counselors may not have been gathered at all. It would behoove institutions to gather these perceptions and address them preemptively.

Through the thematic coding of responses, five key ideas emerged from open-ended survey responses from English faculty members and counselors. These were (a) detachment from the changes in placement reform and acceleration; (b) distrust in data; (c) student success encompassing more than numbers; (d) skepticism and perceived lowering of standards; and (e) the need to offer more support. All five of these themes suggest a disengagement between faculty and counselors and the implementation and management of placement reform and acceleration in

English at Sand College due to the overarching emphasis on not understanding how placement and acceleration affect students. Counselors and faculty members alike specified a mistrust of their control and understanding of how students were affected by the changes in course sequencing and multiple-measures placement. Furthermore, an overall sense of measuring student success by more than persistence, completion, and student-learning outcome assessment while offering additional support structures indicates an innate desire to serve students. These comments also evoke criticism concerning how students are currently helped under these changes. Ultimately, this sheds light on an overarching student-centric culture at Sand College that strives to serve students but may not have the tools to do so.

Furthermore, the recurrent unsolicited suggestion of additional support structures suggests a desire to improve the placement and course sequencing measures enacted at the college. Again, this implies that the respondents have a desire to serve and support their students with as many resources as they can. Overall, these themes support existing research in education that notes when stakeholders felt detached from an initiative, they would perceive that initiative negatively (Hail et al., 2019; Totaro et al., 2011). This would suggest a need for greater involvement from counselors and faculty in placement reform and acceleration at Sand College to alter these perceptions (Hail et al., 2019; Totaro et al., 2011).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study have several implications for practitioners in the community college world. Placement reform and acceleration remain pervasive and growing strategies to increase success, lessen the time to graduation, and create more equitable circumstances for students. This study reinforces the existing literature stating that placement reform and acceleration of English coursework will not decrease student persistence and completion.

Furthermore, this study implies that subject mastery in English, as measured through student learning outcome assessment data, is not negatively impacted by placement reform and acceleration. However, the responses from faculty and counselors regarding their perceptions of placement reform and acceleration at Sand College indicate that a primary barrier to the successful implementation of these measures exists in the way stakeholders perceive their involvement in the process. This disconnect between institutional data and perception suggests an opportunity to improve campus culture and implement placement reform and acceleration. Holistically speaking, any college seeking to implement placement reform and acceleration should measure both institutional rates of student success and the perceptions of practitioners.

Based on the themes that emerged from faculty and counselor perceptions, institutions can prioritize four key strategies to ensure that stakeholders perceive themselves as involved and effective in the implementation of acceleration and placement reform. These measures include (a) consistently gauging the perception of faculty and counselors, (b) transparently clarifying processes and data, (c) establishing a best-practice assessment plan, and (d) developing a shared understanding of student success.

First, per previous scholarship and the theme of detachment from the changes in placement reform and acceleration, measuring stakeholder perceptions of placement reform and acceleration before, during, and after the implementation of these strategies can ease the transition to new models of education (Beck & Blumer, 2016; Paulson, 2012). Faculty and counselors should be surveyed or interviewed before changes are made to placement or remediation practices at the institution to emphasize their agency in the process (Paulson, 2012). Beck and Blumer's (2016) study highlighted that when faculty members perceive themselves as major contributors to campus changes that affect their courses, they view the outcomes of these

initiatives as more positive than top-down initiatives. Any community college hoping to make changes in placement reform and acceleration would be well-served by a peer-reviewed survey gauging perception administered regularly through the implementation process. Not only would this emphasize the importance of faculty and counselors in the implementation process, but it would also open communication and allow for the development of additional support structures for students and faculty as a result of respondents' suggestions.

Second, the overarching distrust of data suggests a need for additional data literacy development at an institution implementing changes in placement or remediation. The perceptions of the success of placement reform and acceleration varied from the institutional data, suggesting a misunderstanding of how to access or interpret these values. Repeatedly, faculty and counselors in this study noted that they felt data did not accurately reflect their experiences, expressed doubt about the quality of institutional data, and expressed a desire for additional research. Prioritizing data literacy through professional development is an opportunity to truly engage faculty members and counselors in improving student outcomes through placement reform and acceleration by making data meaningful to them. Furthermore, the consistent dissemination and examination of data from the administration could help build confidence in faculty and counselors attempting to use data to guide pedagogy and curricula. However, without professional development showing how to use and understand data, access to data will not solve the issues expressed through these responses.

Third, a broader understanding of student success that includes faculty and counselor perceptions is necessary to comprehensively measure the holistic efficacy of changes in placement and remediation. When asked about persistence, completion, and subject mastery, respondents showed concerns about other student success metrics. This included student self-

91

esteem, performance at four-year universities, the interdisciplinary assessment of writing skills, and increases in the number of English majors. These measures of student success were not included in this study. Still, if previous perception data had been accrued, these success measures would have provided a meaningful basis for analysis that could have helped to assuage stakeholders' concerns and reflect the campus's ethos.

Finally, up-to-date practices in student-learning outcome assessment should be prioritized for institutions attempting to measure subject mastery. As the most common concern about placement reform and acceleration relates to a fear of subject loss and underprepared students being moved through coursework, creating an assessment plan that allows for collaborative and transparent assessment would alleviate these issues (Almy, 2017; Jaschik, 2011). As noted by Suskie (2018), engaging faculty in creating a common assessment, detailed rubric, and consistent norming processes would provide more detailed and valuable data for maintaining standards and aiding students in subject mastery. Furthermore, according to the study conducted by Omer and Jabeen (2016), preparing a student-learning outcome assessment plan that allows for data to be disaggregated is essential to measuring the equitable pursuit of subject mastery. The key to meaningful assessment is collaborative planning that preemptively quantifies what educators wish to measure about their students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research bears repeating at Sand College and other institutions undergoing the shift to multiple measures placement and ending the remediation of English courses. Ultimately, this research project was designed as an instrumental study that would begin a conversation addressing the critics of placement reform and acceleration. As an instrumental study per Creswell and Plano (2017), this research was intended to holistically explore a typical example

of placement reform and acceleration implementation with the added analytical metrics of subject mastery and the perception of stakeholders. The research featured in this study is a mere starting point for examining the placement reform and acceleration of English coursework. Future researchers interested in placement reform and acceleration should further study subject mastery under these measures and gauge stakeholder perceptions. By addressing the concerns of faculty and counselors, placement reform and acceleration can be finetuned to truly resolve the conflict between preserving the quality of education and empowering students to succeed.

Conclusion

As I close this study, I am reminded of the ideals that inspired me to study English composition. I believe that literacy is an essential skill for every person. I believe that every person has the right to understand the world around them through reading, writing, and communication. I believe it is the inherent responsibility of educational institutions to teach these skills equitably. This study was motivated by these core values, and it sheds light on how collegiate educators can better serve their students.

Ultimately, at the heart of every community college is the same mission that drives me: to help students. However, helping students means many things to different stakeholders. For some, persistence and completion are the ultimate measures of student success. For others, mastery of a core subject will inherently benefit a student's life in almost every realm. For yet still others, helping students means something more amorphous, something that we do not yet measure. Placement reform and acceleration are manifestations of the desire to guarantee that educators are serving students to the best of their ability. Yet, the full picture of these measures to increase persistence and completion bears further study into how they might be affecting students in their future studies and employment. This work is a step toward alleviating the conflict between the

community college mission and the often-disappointing outcomes students endure (Curl &

Lesnick, 2017). Hopefully, this work reconciling institutional measures and perceptions of

student success is merely beginning, as colleges continue to evolve to ensure that our institutions

truly serve students.

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Appendix A

Faculty and Counselor Survey Tool

Thank you for accessing this survey. Your responses will assist in a study on placement reform, acceleration, and student success in English composition. The following questions are about your experiences with placement reform or multiple measures placement and acceleration in English.

For the purposes of this survey:

Placement reform refers to the use of a measure other than standardized testing to recommend coursework to incoming students.

Multiple measures placement is the use of at least two or more criteria separate from standardized testing to assess a students' readiness for college coursework and make course placement decisions.

Acceleration is the compressing or elimination of remedial coursework.

Individual names and identifying information will not be included in survey results, so please be completely candid.

- This survey takes about 25-30 minutes to complete.
- The deadline to submit your responses is May xx, 2021.

Thank you for your participation.

For the purpose of this survey, please think about current and past students in English 001A courses.

During this academic term, which best describes your position at the institution?

- Part-time English faculty

- Full-time English Faculty
- Counselor

Have you or are you currently teaching developmental courses in English at this college?

- Yes
- No

How much do you know about how placement reform or multiple measures placement in English

is implemented at this college?

- Nothing
- Very Little
- Some
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

How much do you know about how acceleration of coursework in English is implemented at this

college?

- Nothing
- Very Little
- Some
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

Under the English 70 and 71 course-sequencing model, how prepared do you think students were

for English 1A?

- Not prepared at all
- Somewhat prepared
- Adequately prepared
- Very prepared
- I'm not sure

Under the English 61 course-sequencing model, how prepared do you think students were for English 1A?

- Not prepared at all
- Somewhat prepared
- Adequately prepared
- Very prepared
- I'm not sure

Under accelerated coursework (no requirement for English 70, 71, 61 or any other developmental English course), how prepared do you think students are for English 1A?

- Not prepared at all
- Somewhat prepared
- Adequately prepared
- Very prepared
- I'm not sure

How accurately do you feel students were placed into English coursework using Accuplacer?

- Not accurately at all
- Somewhat accurately
- Very accurately
- I'm not sure

How accurately do you feel students are placed into English coursework using multiple measures placement?

- Not accurately at all
- Somewhat accurately
- Very accurately
- I'm not sure

Based solely on your own perceptions and existing knowledge, how do you think students are performing on the following metrics under acceleration and placement reform:

Subject mastery, the fulfillment of course goals and standards as listed on the course outline of

record:

- Much worse than before
- Slightly worse than before
- The same as before
- Slightly better than before
- Much better than before

Persistence, the continuation of coursework at the college after English 001A:

- Much worse than before
- Slightly worse than before
- The same as before
- Slightly better than before
- Much better than before

Completion, the achievement of a degree or certificate:

- Much worse than before
- Slightly worse than before
- The same as before
- Slightly better than before
- Much better than before

Prior to acceleration and placement reform, at the time students finished English 001A, had they

generally achieved the following course goals?

Demonstrate process-driven writing that includes drafting, revising, and editing strategies.

- Students never accomplished this goal
- Students rarely accomplished this goal
- Students sometimes accomplished this goal
- Students always accomplished this goal

Compose logical, well-developed essays that clearly articulate a thesis supported by textual

evidence and that demonstrate an awareness of audience.

- Students never accomplished this goal
- Students rarely accomplished this goal
- Students sometimes accomplished this goal
- Students always accomplished this goal

Apply critical reading strategies to the analysis of college-level texts.

- Students never accomplished this goal
- Students rarely accomplished this goal
- Students sometimes accomplished this goal
- Students always accomplished this goal

Evaluate sources in the service of an argument while accurately documenting sources in MLA

and/or APA style.

- Students never accomplished this goal
- Students rarely accomplished this goal
- Students sometimes accomplished this goal
- Students always accomplished this goal

After acceleration and placement reform, at the time students finished English 001A, had they

generally achieved the following course goals?

Demonstrate process-driven writing that includes drafting, revising, and editing strategies.

- Students never accomplish this goal
- Students rarely accomplish this goal
- Students sometimes accomplish this goal
- Students always accomplish this goal

Compose logical, well-developed essays that clearly articulate a thesis supported by textual

evidence and that demonstrate an awareness of audience.

- Students never accomplish this goal
- Students rarely accomplish this goal
- Students sometimes accomplish this goal
- Students always accomplish this goal

Apply critical reading strategies to the analysis of college-level texts.

- Students never accomplish this goal
- Students rarely accomplish this goal
- Students sometimes accomplish this goal
- Students always accomplish this goal

Evaluate sources in the service of an argument while accurately documenting sources in MLA

and/or APA style.

- Students never accomplish this goal
- Students rarely accomplish this goal
- Students sometimes accomplish this goal
- Students always accomplish this goal

Overall, do you see placement reform and multiple measures placement as a positive change at

your institution?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

Overall, do you see acceleration of English coursework as a positive change at your institution?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

Do you have any other thoughts on how acceleration and placement reform in English has affected subject mastery, persistence, and completion?

Do you have any thoughts on how acceleration and placement reform might affect certain groups of students more than others?

Table B1

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who

Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO1

	Exceeds expectations	Meets expectations	Does not meet expectations
2014-15	12.43%	37.56%	50.01%
2015-16	14.29%	33.33%	52.38%
2016-17	23.06%	57.59%	19.35%
2017-18	25.81%	67.74%	7.16%
2018-19	26.38%	62.42%	11.20%
2019-20	28.57%	66.67%	4.76%

Table B2

Percentage of students completing freshman composition courses from 2014 to 2020 who exceeded, met,

or did not meet SLO 2

	Exceeds expectations	Meets expectations	Does not meet expectations
2014-15	59.70%	14.93%	25.37%
2015-16	42.86%	28.57%	28.58%
2016-17	41.49%	44.84%	13.60%
2017-18	26.28%	47.44%	26.28%
2018-19	27.68%	54.32%	18.00%

| 2019-20 | 28.57% | 66.67% | 4.76% |

Table B3

Percentage of Students Completing Freshman Composition Courses from 2014 to 2020 who Exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO 3

	Exceeds expectations	Meets expectations	Does not meet expectations
2014-15	58.10%	30.48%	11.43%
2015-16	39.81%	34.10%	26.09%
2016-17	26.67%	60.00%	13.33%
2017-18	51.52%	42.42%	6.06%
2018-19	51.30%	42.92%	5.78%
2019-20	48.90%	53.23%	4.33%

Table B4

Percentage of students completing freshman composition courses from 2014 to 2020 who exceeded, met, or did not meet SLO 4

	Exceeds expectations	Meets expectations	Does not meet expectations
2014-15	26.58%	50.66%	22.76%
2015-16	33.76%	53.46%	12.78%
2016-17	35.11%	50.00%	14.89%
2017-18	26.67%	60.00%	13.33%

| 2018-19 | 32.53% | 43.73% | 23.73% |
| 2019-20 | 32.27% | 39.44% | 28.29% |