

# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE CUT SCORE

## Redesigning Placement Assessment Policy to Improve Student Success

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

*It's Not About the Cut Score* was prepared by JFF for Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed (earn degrees, earn certificates, or transfer to other institutions to continue their studies).

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Placement assessment policy—governing how colleges assess the academic skills of entering students and place them in courses that are appropriate for their skill levels—can be an important lever for increasing student success in community colleges. A coherent placement assessment policy would indicate which students must be assessed, specify assessment instruments, set cut score standards, and articulate the protocols and procedures to be used uniformly across a state's community college systems. Well-designed placement assessment policies can help increase student success in a number of ways: by accurately assessing student skills and placing students in the courses they need; by ensuring consistent standards from college to college; and by providing comparable and timely data on student outcomes that states and institutions can use to inform their practices and policies.

Placement assessment policies can also help improve the college readiness of incoming students—an explicit goal in many states—by setting clear college-level performance expectations, and then communicating those expectations so that students arrive ready for college-level work.

With these benefits in mind, many states are evaluating their placement assessment policies, or lack thereof. As they do, they are finding that

setting placement assessment policy is not a simple process. This brief describes the experiences of three states in the national initiative *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* as they revised their placement assessment policies. When the Virginia Community College System set out to establish common cut scores, it unknowingly embarked upon a process that quickly made cut scores secondary to standardizing placement processes and procedures. In Connecticut, questions about cut scores quickly led to much larger questions about quality and costs. And the North Carolina Community College System finds itself continually adapting and revisiting a process that began in the 1980s. The stories of Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina in setting placement assessment policy, as well as the current policies of all *Achieving the Dream* states, suggest lessons for other states.

Additional research is needed to understand the impact of common placement standards on success outcomes, and there are many good reasons for embarking on this analysis. The brief concludes with recommendations—informed by the experience of *Achieving the Dream* and other states—that can help states develop optimal placement policies from the perspective of improving community college student outcomes.

### Achieving the Dream State Placement Assessment Policies

Placement Policy Options	Yes	No
Are students required to take placement tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, SC, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, WA
Does the state require specific tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Does the state specify which students are exempt?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Is there a common statewide placement cut score?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Are students required to enroll in or complete developmental education within a specified time period?	AR, FL, OK	CT, HI, MA, MI, NC, NM, OH, PA, SC, TX, VA, WA