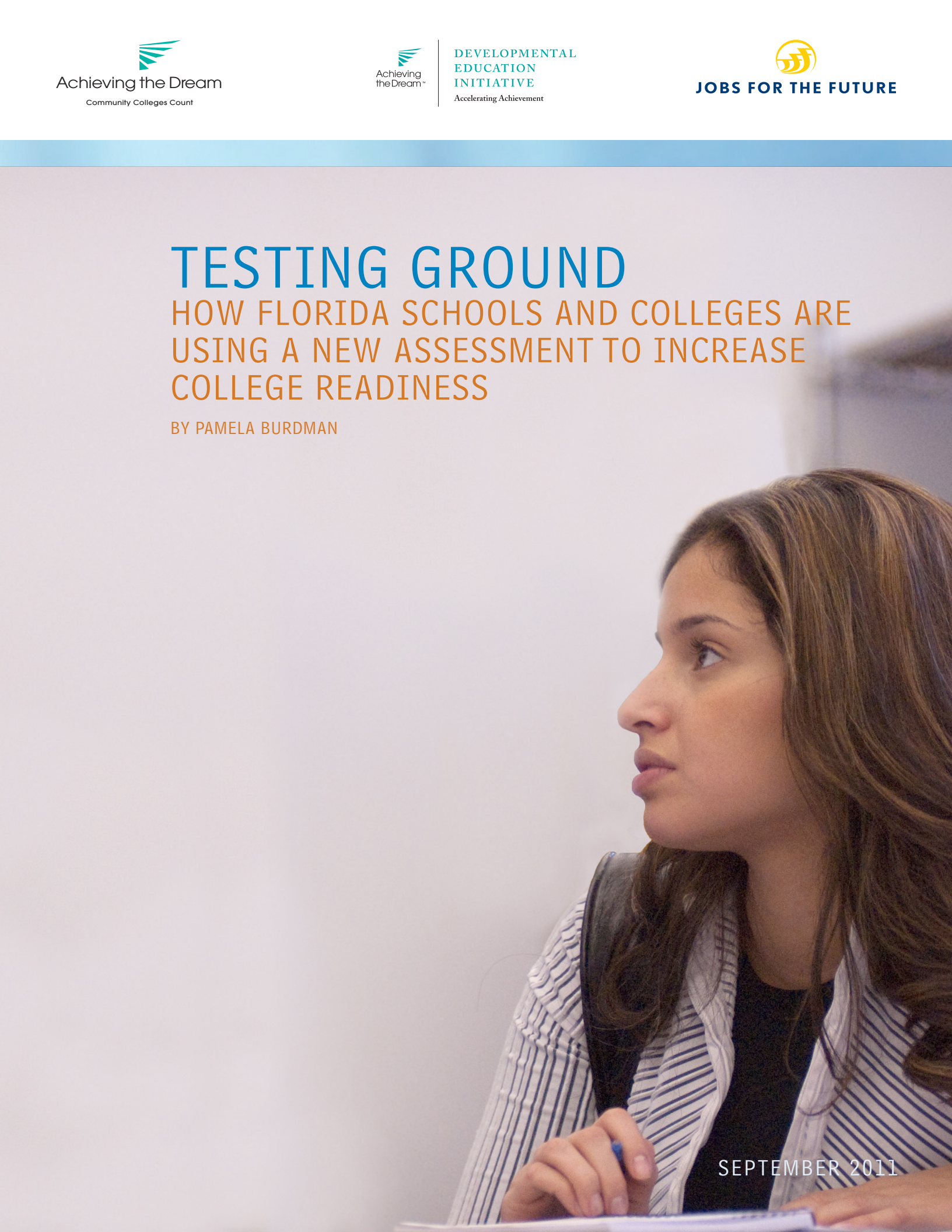


# TESTING GROUND

HOW FLORIDA SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES ARE  
USING A NEW ASSESSMENT TO INCREASE  
COLLEGE READINESS

BY PAMELA BURDMAN



SEPTEMBER 2011



## Achieving the Dream

Community Colleges Count

**Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count** is a national nonprofit dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Data-driven, student-centered, and built on the values of equity and excellence, Achieving the Dream is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by: 1) transforming community college practices; 2) leading policy change; 3) generating knowledge; and 4) engaging the public. Launched as an initiative in 2004 with funding from Lumina Foundation, Achieving the Dream is today the largest non-governmental reform movement for student success in community college history. With more than 160 community colleges and institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 16 state policy teams—working throughout 30 states and the District of Columbia—Achieving the Dream helps 3.5 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.

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**The Developmental Education Initiative** consists of 15 Achieving the Dream community colleges that are building on demonstrated results to scale up developmental education innovations at their institutions. Six states are committed to advancing their Achieving the Dream state policy work in the developmental education realm. Managed by MDC with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation, the initiative aims to expand groundbreaking remedial education programs that experts say are key to dramatically boosting the college completion rates of low-income students and students of color. The innovations developed by the colleges and states participating in the Developmental Education Initiative will help community colleges understand what programs are effective in helping students needing developmental education succeed and how to deliver these results to even more students.

[WWW.DEIONLINE.ORG](http://WWW.DEIONLINE.ORG)

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About three dozen individuals, most of them Florida officials and educators, made themselves available to provide valuable information for this report. Their assistance is a testament to their commitment to improving outcomes for students. In particular, the author would like to thank Julie Alexander, John Hughes, and Pat Windham for their admirable patience in responding to inquiries and clarifying details. I would also like to thank Lara Couturier, Richard Kazis, and Katrina Reichert of JFF's Achieving the Dream/Developmental Education Initiative state policy team for their support and partnership.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the nation, state governments and private foundations are pursuing the long-elusive goal of improving college completion rates. Driving these efforts is growing awareness of the large proportion of students who come to college—especially community college—unprepared for college-level coursework. This challenge is one that the states and colleges involved in Achieving the Dream and its Developmental Education Initiative have been addressing for several years.

Now states are turning to a familiar tool of education reform—assessment—as a valuable lever to advance college-readiness efforts. *Testing Ground* describes how Florida's Division of Colleges worked with K-12 partners to design, plan, and launch an ambitious college-readiness agenda with a new college placement test as its centerpiece. By using data to create a sense of urgency, making faculty central players, and ensuring that prominent champions keep the efforts alive, Florida's education system is well on its way to implementing major college-readiness reforms.

### NEW PLACEMENT TEST AS BACKBONE OF COLLEGE READINESS REFORMS

This case study begins in 2004. Florida's two-year college system had just been chosen to participate in Achieving the Dream, and staff from the Division of Florida Colleges were taking a hard look at disappointing data. Fortunately, the division had good ties with the state's K-12 system. Both reported to Florida's Commissioner of Education, and they were housed together in the state's Department of Education, laying the foundation for collaboration. Plus, collectively they were rich in data: Florida has the nation's oldest K-20 longitudinal student data system, tracking every individual from their entry into the education system to their exit, and into the job market.

The data painted a complex portrait of how high schools were preparing students for college. The key finding was that a large proportion of students who had passed Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test in high school were not passing college placement tests. Such results laid the groundwork for a new round of education reforms in Florida, this time aimed at increasing college readiness and college completion. Initiated variously by educators, the State Board of Education, and the legislature, the changes—involving policy levers such as coursework, assessment, and placement—are still being phased in today.

Seven years later, what began as a simple data inquiry has resulted in a major realignment of expectations for learning across Florida's educational systems. On the K-12 side, the changes include:

- > Raising curriculum content standards in all subjects;
- > Adding a college-preparation indicator to the K-12 accountability system;
- > Offering college placement exams in eleventh grade; and
- > Adding brush-up courses in the senior year to help students avoid developmental courses in college.



The colleges' innovations include:

- > Working with K-12 and university instructors to develop new Postsecondary Readiness Competencies and aligning them with the Common Core State Standards;
- > Developing and implementing a new, customized placement test—the Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT)—based on the Postsecondary Readiness Competencies, to replace Florida's version of the ACCUPLACER;
- > Restructuring the developmental education sequence to consist of two levels each of math, reading, and writing at every college;
- > Developing diagnostic additions to PERT to provide more detailed analysis of individual students' remediation needs in math, reading, and writing; and
- > Designing modularized remedial courses tailored to students' specific learning needs to accelerate student progression and reduce costs.

The backbone of these reforms is the new PERT assessment, one of the nation's first customized college placement tests. Simultaneously a placement tool for colleges and a college-readiness indicator for high schools and their students, this single test has become a key lever for a comprehensive alignment of the K-12 and postsecondary systems.

The competencies assessed by PERT are linked to the new K-12 standards, the colleges' entry-level courses, and the new statewide developmental education sequence. The state will use PERT to inform high school students about how well prepared they are for college-level work, measure the performance of high schools in boosting college readiness, and determine whether entering college students should be placed into developmental or college-level courses. Launched in October 2010, PERT is expected to be available in every college and high school statewide by the end of 2011.

The PERT Diagnostic, a separate test that will be introduced in fall 2011 in colleges on a voluntary basis, is predicated on the theory that more information about students' areas of deficiency can lead to improved instruction in developmental courses.



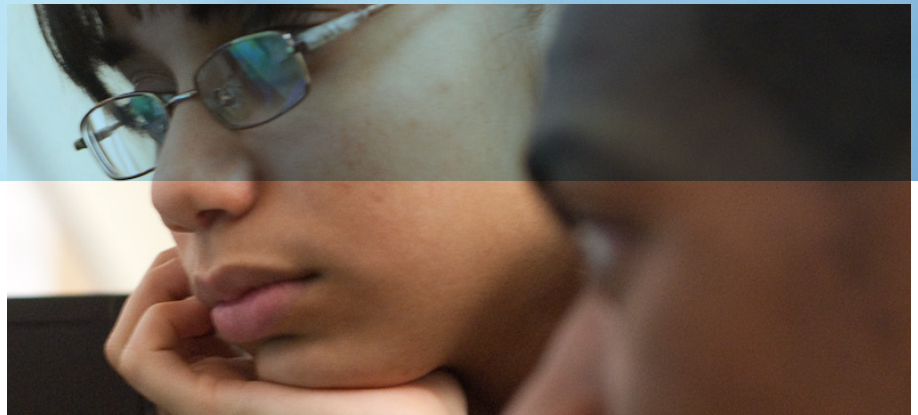
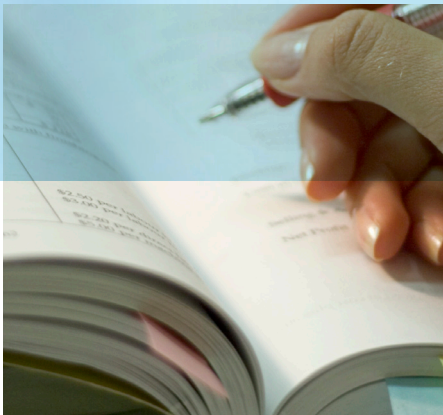
## IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER STATES: START WITH DATA, ENGAGE FACULTY AND CHAMPIONS, TAKE RISKS

The story of Florida's seven-year effort to increase college readiness illustrates the intensive, sustained commitment required to implement meaningful education policy changes. As told through several dozen interviews with Florida officials and educators, *Testing Ground* also reveals how important attention to process can be. Coordination across sectors and the centrality of faculty are often subjects of lip service, but efforts to improve college readiness rarely succeed unless both are made authentic priorities. In addition, Florida's experience demonstrates how an unblinking attention to data can lead to candid conversations that transcend traditional educational silos and ultimately result in promising innovations.

Several important lessons emerged about the necessary policy conditions for pursuing systemic reforms related to college readiness:

- > One or more champions need to hold the vision and maintain momentum.
- > Strong relationships between K-12 and higher education (particularly community colleges) are essential.
- > Use of data is key for highlighting problems as well as focusing on solutions.
- > Faculty must play a central role in understanding and addressing college-readiness gaps.

While the outcomes of this work will be unknown for several more years, the process that Florida undertook in developing its recent reforms stands out for its clarity of vision, strength of leadership, and responsiveness to evidence. Florida has emerged as a national leader within federally funded assessment consortia, largely because of its background in developing college-readiness policies. If the state begins to see the kinds of improvements in student success that officials there expect, its role as a place to emulate will only be solidified.





# COLLEGE READINESS: A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE

**ACROSS THE NATION, STATE GOVERNMENTS AND PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS ARE PURSUING THE LONG-ELUSIVE GOAL OF IMPROVING COLLEGE COMPLETION RATES. THEY ARE SETTING TARGETS FOR POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT AND BUILDING DATA SYSTEMS TO TRACK SUCCESS. INCREASINGLY, STATES RECOGNIZING THE COMPLEX NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE ARE LOOKING BEYOND THE POSTSECONDARY SECTOR FOR SOLUTIONS. THEY ARE EMPHASIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION AMONG K-12 SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO FIND NEW WAYS OF ENSURING THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ACQUIRE THE ESSENTIAL SKILLS THEY NEED FOR COLLEGE.**

Driving these efforts is growing awareness of the large proportion of students who come to college—especially community college—unprepared for college-level coursework. Their chances of graduating are diminished before they take a single class. More than half of community college students enroll in at least one developmental course; less than one-fourth of these students earn credentials or complete degrees (Attewell et al. 2011). Education leaders and policymakers are asking how high schools can guarantee that their recent graduates are ready to take—and pass—credit-bearing college courses, as well as how community colleges can accelerate developmental learning for students not yet ready for college work. This challenge is one that the states and colleges involved in Achieving the Dream and its Developmental Education Initiative have been addressing for several years (Goldberger, Gerwin, & Choitz 2008).

Now states are turning to a familiar tool of education reform—assessment—as a valuable new lever to advance college-readiness efforts.<sup>1</sup> While high school graduation exams have been the target of federal and state policy over the last decade, a growing number of states are revisiting their postsecondary placement policies as well. Some college systems involved in Achieving the Dream have been leaders in this work. The shift comes from the realization that college placement tests do much more than determine which students need remedial math or English courses and who can take college-level classes right away. They also send important signals to public schools and their students about what colleges expect high school graduates to know and be able to do when they begin higher education (Kirst & Venezia 2005).<sup>2</sup>



At the same time, the attention to college placement exams has revealed weaknesses of the current testing system. Some see the exams more as obstacles than aids to student success. Concerns center on inaccuracy in measuring skills, misalignment with high school standards, and inconsistencies in content and cutoff scores across colleges.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence that incoming college students do not realize that a mere test score could lengthen their pathway to a degree (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine 2010). The assessment improvement initiatives that appear most promising for increasing college completion are those that address these concerns through the collaboration of K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions. While there is much discussion about the need for joint ownership in developing solutions, there are few examples of effective practice.

The state of Florida is an encouraging exception. *Testing Ground* describes how Florida's Division of Colleges worked with K-12 partners to design, plan, and launch an ambitious college-readiness agenda with a new college placement test as its centerpiece. By using data to create a sense of urgency, making faculty central players, and ensuring that prominent champions keep the efforts alive, Florida's education system is well on its way to implementing major college-readiness reforms.

If these efforts yield the success that Florida expects, they are poised to become a model for other states embarking on college-readiness initiatives, including the Common Core State Standards, in the years to come.

## FACING FACTS: DATA UNDERSCORED NEED FOR REFORM

It was late 2004. Florida's two-year college system had just been chosen to participate in Achieving the Dream, a national initiative to increase student success at community colleges (see box, "Florida's Participation in Achieving the Dream and the Developmental Education Initiative" on page 3). Coming on the heels of a series of reform efforts launched by then-Governor Jeb Bush to improve Florida's K-12 school system, the focus on community colleges seemed well timed.

Under the leadership of then-Chancellor David Armstrong, staff from the Division of Florida Colleges were taking a hard look at disappointing data. Only 41 percent of the state's first-time, full-time students completed an Associate's degree or certificate within three years. Since most students attended part time, the overall community college completion rate was far lower.<sup>4</sup> After five years, only about 26 percent of all students were earning a credential (Windham n.d.). Analyzing these data led Armstrong and his colleagues to the same fundamental problem facing other broad-access institutions of higher education: the large proportion of incoming students who failed college placement exams and required remedial courses before they could start college-level courses. The figure was sobering—about 65 percent of students, according to studies at the time (Florida Department of Education 2005).

These were not just students who had been out of school for years. Even among recent graduates of the Sunshine State's high schools, 57 percent required one or more developmental courses.<sup>5</sup> Community college leaders were determined to serve these students better, but they knew the scope of the challenge. They would need to figure out how to bridge a wide gap: College-ready students were more than twice as likely to earn an Associate's degree or certificate within five years than students who required one or more developmental courses (Florida Department of Education 2005).

The persistently high remediation rates left Armstrong and his chief deputy, Executive Vice Chancellor Judith Bilsky, scratching their heads. After all, the Florida Department of Education had been signaling that the governor's K-12 reform initiatives were having a positive impact.

## FLORIDA'S PARTICIPATION IN ACHIEVING THE DREAM AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Florida has participated in Achieving the Dream since 2004, as part of the first cohort of states invited to join. A national initiative funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and numerous other foundations, Achieving the Dream works at both the state and college levels to help more community college students complete degrees and certificates. In particular, the initiative has focused on states and institutions with high proportions of low-income students and students of color. The architects of Achieving the Dream selected Florida and the other first-round states because they were “perceived as having favorable climates for policy change, including stable funding and high-level support for community colleges,” according to a recent evaluation by MDRC, a nonpartisan education and social policy research organization.

Four Florida colleges—Broward, Valencia, Hillsborough, and Tallahassee—participated from the outset. In addition, the Florida Division of Colleges was actively engaged in state policy work, managed by Jobs for the Future, to develop system-level policies to improve the capacity of all the state’s colleges to lift student outcomes. Florida’s involvement in Achieving the Dream supported the system’s efforts to advance evidence-based improvements, foster cross-sector conversations, and encourage innovation. Two important areas for policy reforms within Achieving the Dream states have been data systems and placement policy.

In 2009, Florida and other first-round states signed onto the Developmental Education Initiative, Achieving the Dream’s expanded effort to improve outcomes for students in need of remedial education. The goal is to create, evaluate, and replicate groundbreaking remedial strategies intended to dramatically boost college completion rates of low-income students and students of color. As with Achieving the Dream, both state systems and individual colleges are participating, and Jobs for the Future continues to lead the state work.

As described in this case study, the Florida system’s emphasis in its Developmental Education Initiative work has been modularization of developmental courses, designed to save time for students by focusing only on the specific skills they lack. Valencia College also is participating, working to scale up a series of courses combining subject-matter content and student-success strategies that have been shown to accelerate learning for developmental education students.

“The reforms for K-12 were beginning to show progress,” recalled Armstrong, who has since left the Chancellor’s office and is president at Broward College. “Governor Bush was very involved in K-12. They were becoming encouraged about high school assessments. Graduation rates were improving. There was a trend line in the right direction. But we were not seeing the same success—as measured by preparedness [for college courses],” he said.

Fortunately, the Division of Florida Colleges had good ties with the state’s K-12 system. Both reported to Florida’s Commissioner of Education, and they were housed together in the state’s Department of Education, laying the foundation for collaboration. Plus, collectively they were rich in data: Florida has the nation’s oldest K-20 longitudinal student data system, tracking every individual from their entry into the education system to their exit, and into the job market. Armstrong and his staff had a penchant for probing that data, amplified by their participation in Achieving the Dream, which emphasized the importance of evidence-based planning. “Achieving the Dream helped support us to continue to do more deep research like what we had already started doing,” he said.

Investigating the issue of college readiness, the division’s research director Pat Windham emerged in early 2005 with a complex portrait of how high schools were preparing students for college: what students were studying in high school; how they were scoring on standardized tests; and how that background related to their performance in college. The key finding was this: A large proportion of students who had passed Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test in high school were not passing college placement tests. This was particularly true in math, where 69 percent of students scoring a 3 (out of 5) on the FCAT and 40 percent of students scoring a 4 were placed into remedial courses. The main reason appeared to be the content of their high school coursework (Florida Department of Education 2005a).

“Even though we have calculus and physics and we lead the nation in many categories of Advanced Placement, what all of our students were required to take was not at the level of rigor and quality that all students should be getting,” said Mary Jane Tappen, Florida’s Deputy Chancellor for K-12 education.

These findings—and the discussions surrounding them—laid the groundwork for a new round of education reforms in Florida, this time aimed at increasing college readiness and college completion. Initiated variously by educators, the State Board of Education, and the legislature, the changes involving policy levers such as coursework, assessment, and placement are still being phased in today. Seven years later, what began as a simple inquiry into developmental education course-taking has resulted in a major realignment of expectations for learning across Florida’s educational systems.

On the K-12 side, the changes include:

- > Raising curriculum content standards in all subjects;
- > Adding a college-preparation indicator to the K-12 accountability system;
- > Offering college placement exams in eleventh grade; and
- > Adding brush-up courses in the senior year to help students avoid developmental courses in college.

The colleges’ innovations include:<sup>6</sup>

- > Working with K-12 and university instructors to develop new Postsecondary Readiness Competencies and aligning them with the Common Core State Standards;
- > Developing and implementing a new, customized placement test—the Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT)—based on the Postsecondary Readiness Competencies, to replace Florida’s version of the ACCUPLACER;
- > Restructuring the developmental education sequence to consist of two levels each of math, reading, and writing at every college;
- > Developing diagnostic additions to PERT to provide more detailed analysis of individual students’ remediation needs in math, reading, and writing; and
- > Designing modularized remedial courses tailored to students’ specific learning needs to accelerate student progression and reduce costs.

The backbone of these reforms is the new PERT assessment, one of the first customized college placement tests in the country. Simultaneously a placement tool for colleges and a college-readiness indicator for high schools and their students, this single test has become a key lever for a comprehensive alignment of the K-12 and postsecondary systems. The competencies assessed by PERT are linked to the new K-12 standards, the colleges’ entry-level courses, and the new statewide developmental education sequence. The state will use PERT to inform high school students about how well prepared they are for college-level work, measure the performance of high schools in boosting college readiness, and determine whether entering college students should be placed into developmental or college-level courses.

Launched in October 2010, PERT is expected to be available in every college and high school statewide by the end of 2011. The PERT Diagnostic, a separate test that will be introduced in fall 2011 in colleges on a voluntary basis, is predicated on the theory that more information about students’ areas of deficiency can lead to improved instruction in developmental courses. In particular, the diagnostic information will support colleges’ offering modularized remedial courses. At least six Florida colleges are piloting this innovation to help students more quickly address their individual learning needs. If the pilots are successful, others are expected to follow suit.

The story of Florida's seven-year effort to increase college readiness illustrates the intensive, sustained commitment required to implement meaningful education policy changes. As told through several dozen interviews with Florida officials and educators, the tale also reveals how important attention to process can be: Coordination across sectors and the centrality of faculty are often subjects of lip service, but efforts to improve college readiness rarely succeed unless both are made authentic priorities. In addition, Florida's experience demonstrates how an unblinking attention to data can lead to candid conversations that transcend traditional educational silos and ultimately result in promising innovations.

## LAYING GROUNDWORK: COMMITMENT AND COLLABORATION CRITICAL

Those candid conversations began in Tallahassee at the Florida Department of Education. Early on, Chancellor Armstrong and Executive Vice Chancellor Bilsky shared their remediation findings with Education Commissioner John Winn as well as their counterparts in the Division of Public Schools. The data seemed to crystallize an issue—college preparation—that had been on the minds of many in Florida for a long time. It helped that the state's K-20 longitudinal student data system had been in place for about 10 years (see box, “Florida's K-20 Longitudinal Student Data System” on page 10).

“We had more data here than anyone else that could be organized into longitudinal studies,” noted Sandy Shugart, president of Valencia College, an early advocate for improving college preparation. “We had a more acute view of what was happening to students.” The state's involvement in Achieving the Dream, with its focus on using data to advance student success, helped Shugart and others sharpen their analyses in ways that held weight with their K-12 counterparts.

Colleges had been sending feedback reports to high schools about their students' performance—including in remedial education—since 1990, so the idea of relating students' college performance to their high school preparation was not a new one. Around the time that the colleges initiated the discussion about academic preparedness, the state's High School Reform Task Force was winding up its work. The task force had identified a need to increase the percent of graduates who were ready to enter postsecondary institutions without remediation.<sup>7</sup>

“Everything we did was geared toward readiness for college,” K-12 Commissioner Winn recalled in an interview. “We were on the road to being very interested in raising standards farther and creating seamless progression between the standards you need to graduate from high school and the standards you need to go into college without needing remediation.”

Against that backdrop, five conditions bolstered the effort's success.

First, the data that Bilsky and Armstrong shared revealed not just a problem, but a stark incongruence with values that had already been publicly trumpeted. This helped create a **sense of urgency**. K-12 leaders who expected their apparent success with FCAT to bear fruit in the form of better college outcomes were taken aback to discover that was not the case. “The numbers were startling,” Deputy K-12 Chancellor Mary Jane Tappen recalled. “Those [students] who had the courage to walk onto a college campus had to pay for courses that didn't even get them credit. The remediation rates were unacceptable.” Eventually, the same data would cause legislators to take an interest.



## FLORIDA'S K-20 LONGITUDINAL STUDENT DATA SYSTEM

"Florida did some things very early on that were quite bold, and they did them while everybody was sleeping," noted Christine Tell of Achieve, Inc., an education reform organization that helps states raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments and strengthen accountability. Foremost among those efforts was developing the state's K-20 longitudinal data system, which can follow students from kindergarten through graduate school and into the workforce. This data is a rich resource for answering questions about students' progression through the education system, such as:

- > What percentage of ninth graders enroll in college within five years?
- > What percentage of first-time college students start a career within six years?
- > How many students starting at two-year colleges earn Bachelor's degrees within six years and what are their course-taking patterns?

The system was originally created to help the Florida legislature make enrollment projections for various populations of students (e.g., students with disabilities) to help determine funding levels, according to Jay Pfeiffer of MPR Associates, who previously supervised the state's data warehouse. Initially, there were separate data systems for K-12, community colleges, and public universities, as well as employment. Each of these data sources contained individual student records, and by the early 1990s, their joint capacity to exchange student records was unsurpassed. Partly in order to consolidate federal reporting for education, Florida ultimately integrated these and other data sources (for a total of 26 state-level sources) into its current K-20 educational data warehouse in 2003.

The data warehouse, which has proved extremely important for research into student progress through the education system, became a national model for efforts to build P-20 longitudinal data systems. In 1990, Florida colleges began using the system data to send feedback reports to area high schools to let them know how their students were faring in college. The reports answer questions such as how many students took the ACT, SAT, or college placement test, and what percent completed remedial math or English. But perhaps most important, the data provided a basis for dialogues between K-12 and higher education systems at the local and state levels, including those that led to the development of the PERT assessment.

However, until the college division conducted its FCAT analysis, Florida's discussions about preparing high school students for college did not directly involve the institutions that serve students needing postsecondary remedial education—the two-year colleges themselves. The internal conversations at the Department of Education changed that, as officials realized that the best solution to the disconnect in outcomes would be to forge connections in practice. Together, they hatched the idea for another task force. Called *Go Higher, Florida!*, its members would include college presidents, as well as K-12 principals, and superintendents.

Second, building and maintaining **strong relationships across the education sectors** became a central tenet of the college-readiness agenda. "The task force helped us to start that secondary-postsecondary dialogue that was so important—talking about aligning standards, aligning competencies, getting assessments that were aligned to those standards and competencies, not having the finger-pointing from one sector to another," said Bilsky.

In addition, the colleges' efforts as part of Achieving the Dream to improve student success meant that they were focused on what they *could* do to help students, rather than blaming poor preparation or other factors they could not change. That **ownership of the problem**, in turn, made the conversations with public school officials easier. The K-12 officials "knew that we were grappling with this on the postsecondary level," said Bilsky. "But it became very obvious that we couldn't do it alone. It's no great secret that we kind of like to sit here in our colleges and universities and say, 'You're not doing a great job and we're not going to tell you what exactly you're not doing.' I wanted to transcend that."

A fourth key principle was ensuring a **central role for faculty** in developing solutions. Though they were not represented on the *Go Higher, Florida!* task force that set the agenda, math and English faculty were key players in its implementation, especially in establishing the competencies for postsecondary readiness. “I don’t think we did it disingenuously,” said Bilsky. “We felt it was really important for us to work with faculty. You’re not going to get buy-in and you’re not going to get the best product if it’s a top-down decision.”

Last, as is generally the case with policy reforms, it was critical to have a **steady champion of reform**. While governors and system leaders often play this role, numerous leadership transitions in Florida made that impossible. Governor Jeb Bush encouraged the effort early on, but by the time the *Go Higher, Florida!* task force convened, a new governor with much less interest in education, Charlie Crist, had taken office. Winn, Armstrong, and K-12 Chancellor Cheri Yecke all left their jobs before the task force completed its deliberations in late 2007. While many individuals were involved at the state and local levels, it is Bilsky who is often recognized for holding the vision and maintaining momentum in the midst of all the transitions.

Some observers also credit a state system in which K-12 schools and public colleges are jointly governed by a single board, unlike in many other states. Furthermore, a new education commissioner with a strong K-16 vision carried on the work that Winn had begun. “One of the strengths Eric Smith brought to Florida was that, like us, he wanted to look at the whole system,” noted Valencia president Shugart. “We (K-12 and colleges) are still under the same board. This is an example where that’s served us well because the commissioner thinks across the whole system.”<sup>8</sup>

With those conditions in place, the *Go Higher, Florida!* task force made five recommendations that survived all of the leadership transitions and ultimately became the architecture for the reforms to come:

<b>GO HIGHER, FLORIDA! TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>	<b>STATUS, FALL 2011</b>
Adoption of a shared definition of “college and career readiness” by K-12 schools, community colleges, and four-year universities	Completed in late 2008. Revised in April 2010 to align with Common Core State Standards.
Requirement that all high school students take rigorous and relevant courses that prepare them “for life after graduation”	Next Generation Sunshine State Standards adopted by 2010, beginning with English and math in 2007. Senior-year transitional courses for students who are not college-ready established by a 2009 law. A 2011 law requires high schools to offer the transitional courses.
Creation of new high school and postsecondary assessments, including a college-readiness assessment that can be given during high school	PERT assessment launched in October 2010; all colleges to offer by end of 2011, when high school administration will also begin. FCAT 2.0—reflecting Next Generation standards—implementation will be complete in 2012. A 2008 law required readiness assessments for some high school juniors; a 2011 law requires testing for all juniors with specified FCAT scores.
Improved public awareness of current and future assessments, their use as diagnostic tools, and their relationship to learning gains, emphasizing system-wide, cross-sector communication and participation	Ongoing. Began with educators and legislators; ultimately, legislation has ensured communication among high schools and colleges based on a shared definition of college readiness, as well as mandates regarding testing and senior-year transitional courses.
Participation in American Diploma Project	Announced by Governor Charlie Crist in April 2008; participation began in fall 2008 and concluded with development of Postsecondary Readiness Competencies by 2009. Those competencies, subsequently aligned with the Common Core standards, were the basis for the PERT exam.

# DEFINING COLLEGE READINESS: ENGAGED FACULTY KEY

In some states, the effort to define standards for college readiness has been effectively a vehicle for overcoming obstacles to raising K-12 standards. In others, it has been a way to ensure that higher education institutions can agree on what constitutes college-level math and English. Florida was a special case. Educators there were already working on raising K-12 standards. For their part, public colleges and universities had been using a common placement exam for more than 20 years before *Go Higher, Florida!* got started, and common cut scores had been in place for almost 10 years. The idea of a shared readiness definition was not new. In this area, one many Achieving the Dream states still grapple with, Florida was clearly a leader.

In addition, because the state had a common numbering system for courses at all the state's public higher education institutions, college and university faculty were accustomed to meeting with each other to discuss course content in order to ensure consistency.

This background meant that when Governor Charlie Crist announced Florida's participation in the American Diploma Project (ADP), managed by Achieve, Inc., the biggest barrier to aligning secondary and postsecondary standards was not reaching agreement on principles (see box, "*Florida and the American Diploma Project*" on page 13). It was the more mundane challenge of recruiting a group of faculty committed to doing the work.

Moana Karsteter of Tallahassee Community College, among the math instructors who volunteered, found out about the project at an annual math association meeting. "I've always been interested in students being in the right math course. This seemed like a good opportunity to have some input into the bigger picture," she said, in a comment characteristic of faculty participants.

Karsteter was one of about seventy high school and college faculty who attended an all-day workshop that September 2008 at Seminole State College. Collectively, they developed draft sets of entry-level college competencies in reading, writing, and math, basing them on the ADP benchmarks.

"I cannot say enough about Florida's discipline faculty," noted Christine Tell, Director of State Services for Achieve, who worked directly with Florida on the ADP process. "They have a high level of expertise not only in their disciplines but also in defining student learning at different levels. Their articulation committees have a very strong sense of purpose. It's alignment, it's agreement, and it's reaching consistency in student outcomes. This is not territorial. They literally get together to spell out what their agreements are."

In math, faculty had to determine which course to consider college-entry-level, said Gail Burkett of Palm Beach State College, another participant. Should it be college algebra, the first course that counts toward the six required math credits for earning an Associate's degree? Or intermediate algebra—the prerequisite for college algebra—which counts for elective credit but is not offered by all of the state's four-year universities? Ultimately, with the faculty's input, the Department of Education settled on intermediate algebra, the lowest-level credit-bearing course.

After workshop faculty developed the draft competencies, the department surveyed other faculty, as well as industry representatives. Apparently, there was general agreement. "I don't recall anybody even feeling that there was an issue," noted Karsteter. "Because of the common course numbering, the curriculum is pretty uniform."

The same was true in English, as faculty involvement helped ensure. "The one thing I thought that they did well was that they involved faculty at the very beginning," noted Nick Bekas, an English instructor at Valencia College.

## FLORIDA AND THE AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT

The American Diploma Project is a signature initiative of Washington, DC-based Achieve, an education reform organization founded to help states raise academic standards and graduation requirements. The ADP Network, launched in 2005, now includes 35 states that serve 85 percent of U.S. public school students. A state can join ADP with a commitment from its governor, K-12 and postsecondary officials, and business leaders to work together to align the requirements of high school with the expectations of college and career.

While each state develops its own standards, Achieve has created a set of model benchmarks in math and English to guide states in evaluating how theirs compare with the knowledge and skills Achieve considers necessary for success in college. At an October 2007 presentation to the *Go Higher, Florida!* task force, Achieve President Michael Cohen shared an analysis of the Sunshine State Standards. While Florida was already in the process of revising those standards, the presentation helped underscore the concerns that led to the task force's establishment.

ACHIEVE'S ANALYSIS OF FLORIDA'S MATH STANDARDS, 2007				
	GENERAL DIPLOMA (FOUR-YEAR)	CAREER PREP DIPLOMA (THREE-YEAR)	COLLEGE PREP DIPLOMA (THREE-YEAR)	ADP BENCHMARKS
<b>FIRST YEAR</b>	Algebra I	Algebra I	Algebra I level or higher	Algebra I
<b>SECOND YEAR</b>	Equivalent or higher than Algebra I	Unspecified	Algebra I level or higher	Geometry
<b>THIRD YEAR</b>	Equivalent or higher than Algebra I	Unspecified	Algebra I level or higher	Algebra II
<b>FOURTH YEAR</b>	Equivalent or higher than Algebra I	N/A	N/A	Fourth rigorous course beyond Algebra II

*SOURCE: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts: Lessons from the American Diploma Project, a presentation by Achieve to the Go Higher, Florida! task force*

The colleges' leadership in launching the new college-readiness agenda is a direct result of the history of Florida faculty working together collaboratively, according to Tell of Achieve. "It's really hats off to the higher education system in Florida. They take more of a leading role than most higher ed systems take. They have institutionalized this consistent working together and convening of experts around the table . . . and faculty who are very sharp about student learning outcomes," she said.

Meanwhile, K-12 leaders had spent the previous few years upgrading expectations for their students, turning the Sunshine State Standards into the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards. Officials then compared the new Postsecondary Readiness Competencies with the Next Generation Standards. While some description and examples were added, the K-12 content standards themselves were found to be in solid alignment with the readiness competencies that the postsecondary faculty had developed.



# LEGISLATIVE TARGET: REDUCING REMEDIATION

By the time *Go Higher, Florida!* had wrapped up and the American Diploma Project process was underway, the state legislature had also become interested in the issue of college readiness and K-16 alignment. Spurred by some of the same remediation figures that had caught the attention of education officials, the legislative focus brought additional urgency to the issue. In mid-2008, the legislature passed with bipartisan support a law aiming to ensure that high school students who were not on track to be prepared for college math or English could take remedial courses during their senior year.

“We kept hearing these remediation numbers,” recalled Joe Pickens, a sponsor of the legislation who later became president of St. John’s River College. “It was shocking to me that that circumstance could exist for decades and just be accepted.

“I had been a school board lawyer and attended every meeting and every workshop, and the topic never came up. The adjectives that students used were ‘shocked’ and ‘surprised’ and ‘dismayed’ to learn that graduating from high school and passing the FCAT don’t mean you are ready to do college work.” Pickens said the inspiration for the legislation was a presentation about a collaboration between El Paso Community College and its area high schools at a meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting organization.

Among Achieving the Dream colleges, El Paso has been known for a multi-pronged strategy that led both to better-prepared incoming students as well as better college outcomes for students requiring remedial coursework. The college’s analysis of its data on incoming students pushed leaders to reach out to area high schools and pushed the local campus of the University of Texas to develop a “college-readiness protocol.” Part of that protocol involves ensuring that high school students prepare for and take the college placement exam and then have an opportunity to review their scores with counselors and refresh their skills, including through a summer bridge program.

The idea was quite consistent with the work that Florida schools and colleges were already engaged in, and, in fact, there was a similar example close to home: Seminole State College had demonstrated notable success at reducing math remediation rates by offering a math course at local high schools. But Pickens, who sat on a legislative advisory council for the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) at the time, felt strongly that such projects should not merely be voluntary efforts of forward-thinking colleges but rather a matter of state policy.

Taking the examples of El Paso and Seminole, the law targeted students who earned a 2 or 3 (out of 5) on the FCAT reading test and a 2, 3, or 4 on the math test. These scores were considered to be high enough that the students could benefit from attending college, but low enough that they would likely be placed into remedial courses. Schools were required to offer these juniors a chance to take the college placement test if they indicated an interest in going to college. Those who passed the test did not have to repeat it if they enrolled in college within two years. Those who did not pass the test would be given a chance to take care of their remedial needs during their senior year, though the senior-year transitional courses were not initially mandatory.

When the law went into effect, high schools were still using the original FCAT test, which was no longer aligned with the K-12 standards, and colleges were still using ACCUPLACER, which was not aligned with the newly developed competencies. It would not be long before both would change. The legislation would gain added potency once new college assessments were put in place, noted David Spence, president of SREB, which had begun supporting Florida’s efforts through funding for teacher professional development. “They were dealing with an out-of-date test. The standards weren’t very high,” said Spence. “States are better off if they develop a true readiness test based on their standards.”

# KEY INNOVATION: A NEW COLLEGE PLACEMENT TEST

The idea of using a single test taken by a majority of students as a framework for strengthening the transition from high school to college is one that has been advocated by groups such as Achieve and SREB. An oft-cited example is California State University's Early Assessment Program, which uses an augmented edition of California's eleventh-grade standards test to steer students who are not yet college ready into senior-year classes to help them prepare. Preliminary evidence has found that the program may reduce students' likelihood of needing remedial courses by a few percentage points (Howell, Kurlaender, & Grodsky 2010).

When Florida's preferred-pricing contract with the College Board for its version of ACCUPLACER was expiring in 2009, officials sensed an opportunity. "It coincided with the recommendations of the task force," said Julie Alexander, Associate Vice Chancellor for Learning Initiatives. "We knew we had to do something." The college division surveyed college presidents and vice presidents about their priorities. Three emerged: capacity to customize the test to Florida's postsecondary readiness competencies; capacity to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses; and affordability.

"I think the most exciting work is getting the college-readiness testing out to the high schools as early as we can," noted Bill Law, president of St. Petersburg College. "The reality is that the CPT [the Common Placement Test, which at the time was ACCUPLACER] wasn't the best instrument for that because it wasn't diagnostic enough." Nor was it aligned with the newly developed college competencies.

Because no off-the-shelf assessment met all three of the presidents' priorities, the colleges moved toward commissioning a new test, covering math, reading, and writing.<sup>9</sup> In retrospect, Bilsky noted, this was a much larger undertaking than she and her staff realized at the time: "The logistics have been staggering."

Florida's entry into this arena was aided by the fact that the state's public four-year colleges (with one exception) are not authorized to offer remedial courses. The work of developing the test, then, has been coordinated by the colleges—with input from both K-12 and four-year institutions. With less directly at stake for the colleges, there were fewer conflicts than in some states (though the universities were also less engaged in the process). The leadership of college officials was important not just practically but symbolically: Their participation ensured that the reform efforts would have credibility with college faculty in ways that initiatives developed solely by K-12 instructors never could.

The direct fiscal costs have been minimal. A test company was chosen based on the presidents' priorities as well as content submissions judged by faculty. That vendor, McCann Associates of New Jersey, has not charged Florida for

**THE IDEA OF USING A SINGLE TEST TAKEN BY A MAJORITY OF STUDENTS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE IS ONE THAT HAS BEEN ADVOCATED BY GROUPS SUCH AS ACHIEVE AND THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL EDUCATION BOARD.**

developing the test, and its cost per-test administration is less than Florida had been paying the College Board for ACCUPLACER.

The primary costs have been in staff time. Alexander and other staff orchestrated a series of meetings among discipline faculty to set requirements for the test, choose a test vendor, and review a sufficient number of test questions to develop an “item bank” robust enough for a computer-adaptive test. “This is work that offices like ours aren’t typically staffed for,” said John Hughes, Vice Chancellor for Evaluation.

Faculty participants have generally volunteered their time, receiving reimbursement only for travel expenses and an occasional stipend. Many were faculty who helped set the readiness competencies. And most—even those who haven’t always enjoyed the process—seemed to appreciate the opportunity to participate.

“Tedious and aggravating as it may be, I appreciate the fact that we’re at the table and can see what they’re doing and have our hands on it a bit,” said Marilyn Curall, a writing instructor at Valencia. Bekas, her Valencia colleague, added, “It wasn’t that the test company or the state said, ‘Here’s the test. What do you think?’ It was the other way around, starting with, ‘What should be the competencies of somebody coming into college?’ From there, they built the test.”

Though faculty were involved from the beginning—and many credit the effort’s success to this fact—their role became even more extensive than department officials had envisioned. After faculty wrote exemplar questions that were used in selecting a test vendor, officials expected the vendor to write the test items and the faculty to approve them. However, in the early stages of the test’s development, faculty rejected many of the questions developed by the vendor, especially in math.

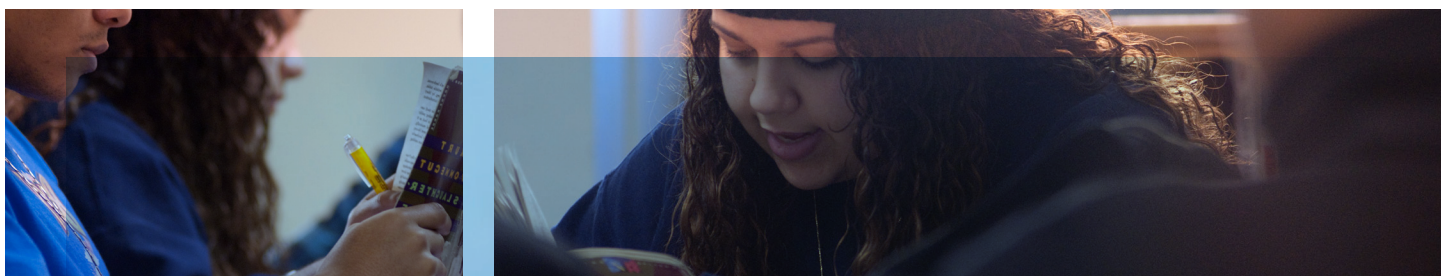
“The first round of item review was kind of painful,” noted Matthew Bouck, director of the state’s Office of Articulation, which supervises the common course numbering system. “McCann didn’t have a sense of what the math faculty wanted.”

To ensure the degree of customization the colleges were seeking, the faculty ultimately became more involved in helping to write test items that matched their expectations. “What we decided was to do it even more collaboratively—let the faculty develop a lot of questions and send to McCann, and let McCann develop them from there,” said Hughes. “The benefits are, to me, worth the work. It’s got tremendously high face validity. It’s off the charts.”

All involved say that the process improved over time, as McCann grew to understand the faculty’s expectations. But early on, agreement with McCann was not the only issue: faculty also had to spend time forming consensus among themselves.

“One of the women in the group teaches college algebra, and her classes have 340 students each. We also had K-12 represented where we have class maximum sizes and very different purposes,” recalled Gail Burkett, a math instructor at Palm Beach State College who participated in the test development. “To try to get everybody to agree on a specific question was very difficult, but we did.”

Generating agreement required many meetings—as many as ten in-person meetings before the process moved to webinar format—and countless emails. While the majority of participants were college faculty, some K-12 and university representatives were also included.



The most divisive issue on the math side had to do with the use of calculators. High school instructors wanted to allow liberal use, while college instructors wanted to make sure students could demonstrate that they understand concepts like “60 times 70” without the crutch of a calculator. “It’s still a sticky point,” noted Nancy Kinard, a high school mathematics instructor from Palm Beach county who participated on the review team. “In high school, we teach the use of calculators a lot. We found a happy medium: On some of the items there is a drop-down menu with a calculator.”

On the English side, faculty grappled with the extent to which a simple test can assess students’ writing ability. “I don’t think there was much disagreement about what college-level writing is,” said Curall. “But it’s a problem to test writing competency in a machine-scorable format.”

That problem was not unique to PERT, and faculty were already familiar with that dilemma from ACCUPLACER. But PERT’s writing assessment did improve upon ACCUPLACER, primarily a sentence-level test. PERT added paragraph- and essay-level skills, since they were part of the postsecondary readiness competencies, said Curall.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Colleges began administering the PERT placement exam in fall 2010, and there have been some glitches. As with any new test, administrators needed to set a “provisional” cutoff score for passing until they had sufficient data to know what scores are associated with success in college courses. For that, they relied on the prior test, the CPT or ACCUPLACER.

“For the sake of simplicity and continuity, we looked at the distribution of CPT scores and tried to target the same percentages of students” on PERT, said Hughes. But the initial cutoff scores for reading and writing turned out to place more students into college-level courses than the ACCUPLACER had. The first cohort of students to take the test performed better than the students who took the pilot test used to set the provisional cutoff scores. Hughes cannot tell whether that is because the students taking the pilot test were less prepared than the entering cohort, because they took the test less seriously, or some other reason.

Whatever the explanation, colleges have had to deal with unpredicted changes in course enrollment. “In our lower-level reading, enrollment is down 35 percent over last summer, said Sally Search, Dean of Academic Support Programs at Tallahassee Community College. “Those students are not 35 percent better prepared. Enrollment in freshman comp is up 23 percent. A number of our faculty have taken the test, and they felt it was very easy.”

The real issue, though, is not the ease or difficulty of the test questions but the initial cut-off scores, which were based on the pilot test data. To address the discrepancy, the college division gave colleges flexibility to make some adjustments when students did not appear properly placed. They then recalibrated the test in April 2011, setting new provisional cut-off scores based on actual (not pilot) scoring patterns. Hughes said that subsequent placements have more or less tracked to the colleges’ expectations.

The interim scores are pegged to maintaining a predictable number of students in each course level, until data can point to a more reliable way to use the test scores to place students. Final cut scores may take a year or more to determine, because they require data on how the test-takers perform in college-level courses, said Hughes. “We will track students into actual coursework and see how they do. We’ll look at that together with expert judgment from faculty to pick the final scores.”

There have been other challenges, too. Though the test was intended to be computer-adaptive, accomplishing that requires a certain volume of questions in an item bank. When the tests were rolled out, math and writing faculty were still working with McCann to add questions in those areas, so only the reading assessment was computer-adaptive in the early stages. The PERT math and writing assessment became available in computer-adaptive format in summer 2011.



Another concern is the length of the test. While ACCUPLACER took Florida students about 90 minutes to complete, students generally spend at least twice that long to take all three sections of PERT, according to Joyce Romano, Vice President for Student Affairs at Valencia. “We’re concerned about fatigue if they come in and take all three tests in one day,” she noted. “We’re also concerned about the wait times for students.” While the ACCUPLACER included 52 items (20 each for reading and writing and 12 for math), PERT includes 90 items (30 in each area). Officials at Valencia have found that students typically allot the most time to math, so the increase in the number of math items appears to have had a disproportionate effect on the time required for the test. The adaptive version so far contains the same number of items, so its introduction is not expected to shorten the time.

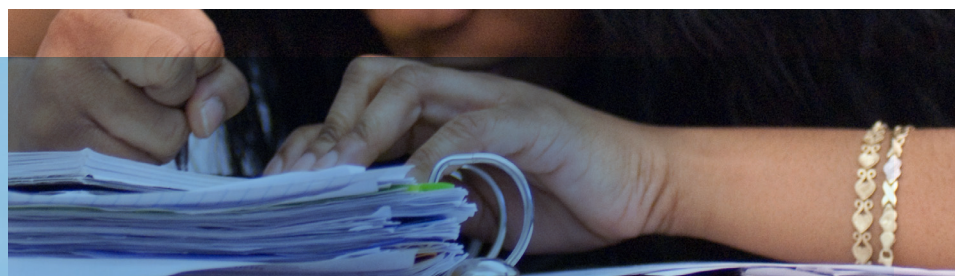
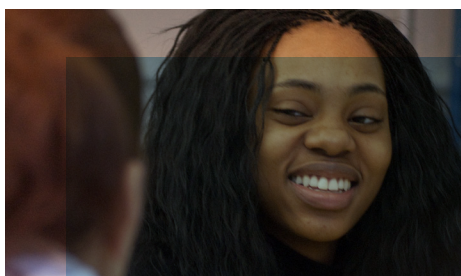
Though colleges were encouraged to start administering PERT beginning in fall 2010, a few were waiting until such kinks were worked out. Those with reservations include early advocates for the test, such as Bill Law of St. Petersburg. “It was not ready for prime time,” Law said. “We had a little bit of a chicken and egg. They couldn’t get enough people to take the test. The promise is still a little bit ahead of the actual.”

In particular, Law and others who were excited about the test’s diagnostic capabilities were disappointed to learn that those will not be part of the basic PERT exam. Rather, to get a finer-grained picture of students’ skills, colleges will need to offer additional assessments after placing students into specific developmental levels. As it turned out, to both place students and provide a diagnosis of their specific needs within the level they are placed would require a prohibitively long test. For now, there is no way to provide this diagnostic information to high school students or their teachers, because high schools do not have a plan for implementing the PERT Diagnostic.

By fall 2011, all Florida colleges are expected to use PERT as their primary placement test. Florida A&M University also plans to use PERT. As part of its mission to serve traditionally underrepresented students, A&M is the only Florida public university authorized to offer remedial courses.

While A&M was not mandated to adopt PERT, the four-year colleges strive for transparency, especially in their work with high schools. “Whatever they recommend as the placement test for the community colleges, we use it as well,” said William Hudson, Director of University Retention. “We try to remain consistent within the university system. It makes it less of a challenge . . . so we can get students better prepared.”

**BY FALL 2011, ALL FLORIDA COLLEGES ARE EXPECTED TO USE PERT AS THEIR PRIMARY PLACEMENT TEST.**



# HIGH SCHOOLS ON BOARD: IMPROVING COLLEGE PREPARATION

Meanwhile, K-12 schools are dealing with their own major reforms. Having implemented new standards over the last several years, the new high school assessment aligned to those standards is coming online now as well. FCAT 2.0 reading and math assessments were administered for the first time in Spring 2011. That both high schools and colleges are instituting new tests at the same time complicates the task of monitoring the impact of each change.

So far, when it comes to the proportion of recent high school graduates requiring remedial education at Florida colleges, officials are looking for something more dramatic than the modest decreases of the last few years. “We’re hoping in our data this next year we’ll see some improvement,” said Tappen. “Our expectation is that through these efforts the trend line will go downward.” The outcome will hinge partly on the effectiveness of new programs aimed at strengthening alignment. These are not yet fully implemented, and recently approved legislation seeks to improve them.

Since 2008-09, students with certain FCAT scores have had the opportunity to take the college placement exam in eleventh grade. However, because of their contract with the College Board, only state colleges are authorized to administer the ACCUPLACER placement test to high school students, requiring considerable coordination.

As with many new efforts, the collaboration around testing had some rough starts. Initially, several high schools told Romano they were not interested in offering the test, until they realized that the new law required them to make it available to students with certain FCAT scores who were interested in going to college. “In the beginning, I knew more about it than they [the high schools] did,” said Romano. Also, the high schools do not have the equipment and security in place for computer testing, so the colleges need to provide pen-and-paper versions.

For the first few years of the program, the high school students took the ACCUPLACER. Next academic year, juniors who test will take PERT. Under recent legislation, “postsecondary readiness” of students will influence school grades in the state’s accountability system. Perhaps for this reason, more high schools have begun seeking to offer the test. Romano said that principals have asked Valencia to offer the test to twelfth graders, as well. However, because of funding constraints, few colleges have made it available to seniors. With the implementation of PERT, high schools will have the ability to administer the tests directly, though there still may not be additional funding for seniors.

“The issue is, who pays for that and who initiates it?” said Tappen. “Do we give the exam again and at whose cost? Currently, there’s funding for eleventh graders to take the CPT or PERT. There’s no funding set aside for students to retake it.”

Students whose test scores indicate that they would require remedial classes in college can take senior-year transitional courses that were developed by K-12 and college faculty. There are two sequences in math and in English. A semester-long course in each subject is designed simply to meet remedial needs for students with more serious deficiencies. It does not count toward subject-area graduation requirements. A year-long course that meets graduation requirements is for students whose results are closer to the cut score.

The 2008 legislation required the Department of Education to expand readiness assessment of high school students and led to the development of the transitional courses. However, while it encouraged high schools to offer the courses, it did not mandate or provide extra funding for them. Nor did it specifically require professional development for instructors teaching the courses.

Initially, high schools were slow to offer the courses. By the 2010-11 school year, many high schools still were not offering them, especially in English. Though precise data are not available, estimates based on data shared by the college division's research office show that as of the 2010-11 school year, more than three-quarters of eligible seniors were taking a transitional math course. But far fewer were taking the English courses: only about 7 percent in reading and 2 percent in writing, even though more students failed the readiness tests in English than did in math.

That will change under new legislation mandating that all students (not just those who say that they are college-bound) whose test scores show they are not ready for college take the courses. "We're expecting more high schools to implement it," said Tappen. The college-readiness measure within the high school grading system also provides an extra incentive for schools to boost readiness of those whose test scores reveal they need additional preparation. But the availability of funding and other support for offering the courses is still unclear. Florida received a small grant from SREB to support professional development for teachers offering the new courses last year, but so far no funding is available for 2011-12.

College presidents are optimistic that this work will have a positive impact. At Valencia, the college's work with area high schools led to a reduction in remediation for recent high school graduates from about 68 percent to 55 percent over an eight-year period.<sup>10</sup> "The percentage of recent high school graduates in our service area who come to Valencia and are college-ready has gone up dramatically. The numbers are very impressive," said Shugart.

"We've been sending a comprehensive analysis to the school districts and to every high school in our service area for years—who came to Valencia from their institutions, how they were assessed, and how they performed in their first year with us. We've had a data-sharing model between Valencia and the school districts for quite a while, and that generates a lot of conversation," he said.

## COLLEGE PRIORITY: IMPROVING DEVELOPMENTAL INSTRUCTION

While Florida's new college placement test has become central to high schools' work to improve college readiness, it also was conceived as part of a strategy for improving success for college students who do require remedial courses. Despite ambitious goals, no one expects to eliminate the need for remediation completely—especially because thousands of students start college years after leaving high school.

Florida's first step in improving college success for underprepared students was to restructure the sequencing of the colleges' developmental education coursework. Despite common course numbering, a variety of developmental courses had proliferated over the years, and so colleges were not offering a common sequence. Some had just one or two remedial courses; others had as many as four.

"Over time, these courses have multiplied and blossomed," said Melinda Milles, Director of Transition Programs for the college system. "A lot of the colleges were using the same course numbers, but many of them were not. It was hit or miss. We wanted more transferability among our courses."

Using a series of meetings similar to those used to develop the readiness competencies and PERT, faculty agreed upon a two-course sequence based on common competencies in each of the three subject areas of math, reading, and writing. The statewide Council of Instructional Affairs, composed of the colleges' vice presidents for instruction, also worked on the issue and voted to have all colleges align their courses. A statewide association of developmental education instructors also approved the plan. By spring 2012, all colleges will offer the new sequence.

"We have a highly mobile student constituency," noted Alexander. "This is huge that the colleges agreed to this."

The realignment is closely tied to the aspect of PERT that many have awaited: its ability to “diagnose” students’ strengths and deficiencies to help guide instruction, not just placement. Once it became clear that a fully diagnostic test would be far too lengthy to double as a placement test, officials realized that a more granular diagnostic would need to be predicated on knowing students’ remedial levels—hence the need for a uniform sequence linked to the test. This raises numerous questions for colleges: While the PERT placement exam is costing less than a dollar per test—less than ACCUPLACER—the cost of a separate PERT Diagnostic has not been factored in, and colleges currently have no funding to offer it.

“What we didn’t realize was that that is a separate test,” said Romano. “Not only do we have a cost associated with a second test, but the logistics of when would you ever give it so it is useful to the faculty.” It is not clear whether the diagnostic would be offered after students take the PERT placement, after they enroll in classes, or during actual course sessions. In some cases, it might be used to help students take advantage of learning labs and support centers outside of the regular classroom.

At this point, Florida officials are unsure how or whether individual colleges will choose to use the diagnostic test, which will be available for the lower level in fall 2011. “No one’s ever had the diagnostics designed specifically around their curriculum,” said Hughes. “It’s an open question how they’ll begin utilizing it. The first step is to make it available. We’re going to push it and build in structures linked to the curriculum.”

Karen Marie Borglum, Assistant Vice President for Curriculum and Articulation at Valencia, agrees with that approach: “Maybe we need to have more practice using it to figure out how to best use it,” she said. “You don’t want to do anything too fast until you have all the facts. We’re just at the beginning stages of it.”

For now, there is no plan for high schools to use the diagnostic assessment, but some K-12 leaders are interested in adopting it if it is successful at the college level.

## REMEDICATION GOES MODULAR

The colleges best positioned to use the PERT Diagnostic are those working on modularizing their developmental courses so that students focus only on the areas in which they are weak. In these courses, a semester’s worth of content is broken down into a series of shorter “modules” based on new developmental education competencies. Students are required to complete only those modules where they need additional preparation as identified by the PERT Diagnostic. St. Petersburg, whose president was a vocal proponent of the modularization idea, has been one of the earliest adopters.

“I made my decision a long time ago that the Holy Grail has to do with enhanced assessment intake, orientation at the front door, and then individual student learning plans where the students take ownership of their own learning and direction,” said Bill Law. Offering modularized courses is a piece of that grander vision.

One of six colleges funded through a state Developmental Education Initiative grant to develop modular courses, St. Petersburg is the only one working on modularizing courses across all three developmental subjects—reading, writing, and mathematics. The state support is modest: \$30,000 over three years for each class, with an institutional match.

After experimenting with classes of different lengths, St. Petersburg decided to offer eight-week, two-credit-hour classes targeted to specific competencies students need. The intention is for students to transition to the college-level course, Composition 1 or intermediate algebra, for example, in the second half of the sixteen-week semester. Whenever possible, the same teacher who taught the developmental course also teaches the college-level course, said Martha Campbell, Dean of Communications at St. Petersburg.



For now, the modular courses are designed around online instructional products sold by Pearson—My Writing Lab and My Math Lab, for example. These products have built-in diagnostics as well as course content.<sup>11</sup> While much of the instruction is online, enabling each student to work on whichever modules he or she requires, the classes meet in a classroom where faculty are available to assist students. So far, Campbell says, the hunch that students' needs varied greatly has been borne out by the diagnostics. The competencies students needed to master, she said, "were all over the place."

Students initially were enrolled based on their PERT scores, but faculty decided to widen access. Now the courses are open to students repeating the class, as well as other students recruited from the regular developmental course during the first week of class, when teachers were doing diagnostic assessments. Students work through the content areas where they need additional support.

So far, the college is pleased with the preliminary results. In composition, 69 percent of students passed the course, compared to a 60 percent average over the past three years without modularization. In math, 100 percent of students in the earliest six groups of students moved on to intermediate algebra within the first semester.

"We didn't know how to advise students who didn't get through it in the eight weeks," said Campbell. "As it turned out, we just let them stay and eventually most of them tested out. The remarkable thing was that the withdrawal rate was only 10 percent, which was stunning. I think it's because they . . . had to move so fast in eight weeks, they didn't know what hit them."

Convinced that the courses can work academically, St. Petersburg officials are planning to offer more of them in the fall. A high priority, Campbell said, is to work through more complicated issues of aligning the courses with registration and financial aid policies. Though modularization is not a requirement for colleges, the college division is actively engaged around policy issues such as financial aid in order to ensure that it is a viable option.

"We're really exploring to see what works and to be able to open up opportunities to colleges," said Milles. "We want to open up state policies that facilitate or remove barriers for these types of innovations, but I do not see them being mandated."

## NEXT STEPS: A LONG ROAD AHEAD

After seven years, the major pieces of Florida's college-readiness strategy are coming into place, but it will take several years for some important elements to be worked out. In addition to following the progress of diagnostic testing and modularized instruction, other issues to watch include the following.

### FINAL CUT SCORES

How well PERT is functioning as a linchpin of efforts to improve both college readiness and college remediation will not be clear until final cut scores are in place for a few years. Under federal financial aid regulations, students who did not graduate from high school need to demonstrate an "ability to benefit" from college, and new tests cannot be used to fulfill that requirement until their cut scores are determined. (Until that happens, some students will need to take ACCUPLACER or another approved assessment for this purpose.)

While Florida Department of Education officials are looking for remediation rates to go down, Spence of SREB says that if the cut-off scores are truly set at the level that predicts success in college-level courses, the rates actually could rise in the short term.<sup>12</sup> "I just hope states don't blink and say, 'Okay, we're going to gradually increase the cut scores instead of setting them at the true level,'" he said. "Let's face it, high school exit tests are politically set. They're not set at some kind of absolute quality level. I still think our big problem in readiness is not the standards, it's helping kids meet them."

## COURSE EXIT EXAMS

The exit exams used by Florida colleges to decide whether students have succeeded in remedial courses (including new ones to be offered to high school seniors) have not been updated for about 10 years. “We would like to redo those,” said Bekas of Valencia, who was part of the team that wrote the current exit exam in reading. “Those tests are woefully outdated. The way we’ve moved in terms of contextualized learning, the writing prompts don’t mirror the curriculum we’re teaching. There are prompts like, ‘What was your favorite vacation?’ ” In addition, the exams no longer align with the new developmental education and postsecondary readiness competencies.

Rather than updating the tests, recent legislation led to their elimination for now, giving colleges flexibility to determine whether students are able to succeed in college-level coursework (or to progress from a lower level to an upper-level developmental course). It is now up to the colleges individually or collectively to determine how they will measure whether students have acquired those competencies.

## HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITIONAL COURSES

In late June 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott—the state’s third governor to hold office since the college-readiness initiatives began—signed legislation that will require high schools to offer the senior-year transitional courses. Previously, high schools only were expected to do their best to offer the courses. The implementation of this requirement will ultimately affect how many students get up to speed in high school to avoid developmental courses in college. Because of the elimination of the exit exam, students’ course grades will determine whether they pass—and data analysis will be needed to reveal whether students taking these courses ultimately succeed on the colleges’ placement exams. That will be an important measure of the effectiveness of the courses.

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND THE PARCC CONSORTIUM

The college-readiness initiative encompassing PERT and the senior-year transitional courses has been a natural segue to the Common Core State Standards, developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers, which Florida was early to adopt. “We feel like we’re very fortunate in that our new rigorous standards are a stepping stone to the Common Core,” said Tappen. “The process to write the Common Core standards is almost identical to the process we used, beginning with comparison to top-performing nations.”

Though they were unveiled after the PERT development process began, the Common Core standards have played a role in the PERT process as well. At Commissioner Eric Smith’s urging, the state revisited its readiness competencies in reference to the Common Core, before the final version used to review test items was approved. Still, there will be numerous issues to resolve—such as Florida’s decision to consider intermediate algebra “college-ready” instead of college algebra, which is emphasized by the Common Core Standards.

Last year, Florida won a \$700 million federal Race to the Top grant, including \$140 million dedicated to implementing the Common Core. One of Florida’s three goals is to double the percentage of high school freshmen who ultimately graduate from high school and earn a year’s worth of college credit. “We feel like we’re in a good place when it comes to full implementation of the Common Core by 2014-15,” noted Tappan, citing the experience developing new aligned standards and a new readiness test.

Florida is also a leading member of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers Consortium, a group of about two dozen states. PARCC has won a federal grant to develop a series of assessments for grades three to twelve related to the Common Core. The goal is to help students stay on track in school and graduate prepared for college or a career. Florida’s process of developing PERT has become a model within PARCC for how to develop a test with joint participation from K-12 and postsecondary.

## MONITORING PROGRESS

Perhaps the most important “next step” Florida can take will be to continue to monitor implementation of the college-readiness innovations and collect data on the outcomes. The ability to change direction in light of evidence that showed the weaknesses of prior policies is what led the state down the college-readiness reform path in the first place. If colleges and high schools continue to analyze their data at the institution and state levels, they will undoubtedly uncover areas where policies need to be modified or updated. Ultimately, they will need to understand not just whether high school students are taking placement tests and completing transitional courses. They will also need to understand whether those changes are leading more students to enter college without needing remediation and helping more of those who do need remediation to complete programs of study.

## LEARNING FROM FLORIDA: IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER STATES

Because of growing interest in customized assessments, as well as diagnostic assessments, to increase college readiness, other states are watching Florida’s efforts closely. “I think the fact that the assessment is aligned with the Common Core, will ultimately have a diagnostic, and is tied to interventions is the wave of the future,” said Bruce Vandal, director of postsecondary education and workforce development at the Education Commission of the States.

Among the first to learn about Florida’s work was Virginia, through its involvement in Achieving the Dream and the Developmental Education Initiative. Virginia has already embarked on a project with Florida’s test vendor, McCann. Bilsky has also fielded calls from officials in Texas and California.

Some unique conditions, such as its comprehensive data system, common course numbering, and a core transfer curriculum aligned with four-year institutions, positioned Florida well for the college-readiness work. “Whatever genius got the legislation through for the common course numbers and the acceptance of the 60-hour AA degree into the university, that’s made all the difference,” observed Barbara Sloan, an instructional vice president at Tallahassee Community College. “In Florida, it’s in our genetic makeup. Because we have those, then we work together on everything. It’s in our best interest to have a course that students can take to the university and do well. It’s in the high school’s best interest to have students who can pass our entrance test.”

While cognizant of that background, Florida officials feel strongly that other states need not wait until their data systems or course numbering systems are changed before they can embark on developing new assessments aimed at improving college readiness, whether for high school or college students. Rather than reinvent the wheel, they are hopeful that other states can strengthen their efforts by learning from Florida’s experience.

It was much more difficult than they expected. “There was a lot of work involved, and there were many more steps than we envisioned and it will take longer than we thought,” Bilsky said. “But we really, I think, took on the sense of a mission, that we were doing something very pioneering that would benefit the students who we serve, and we kept the focus on the students.”

Several important lessons emerged about the necessary policy conditions for pursuing systemic reforms related to college readiness:

- *One or more champions need to hold the vision and maintain momentum.* This is true of policy change in general but especially true when multiple agencies and stakeholders are involved. The champions help invoke a sense of urgency, maintain momentum, and ensure that the college-readiness agenda is tied to existing values and priorities.

- > *Strong relationships between K-12 and higher education (particularly community colleges) are essential.* While the state's K-16 data system helped lay the groundwork in Florida, strong relationships can be established even in states where data systems are not yet fully developed. An attitude of joint ownership of the problem, with a focus on students' needs, can help avoid finger pointing.
- > *Use of data is key for highlighting problems as well as focusing on solutions.* Data help move the conversation from speculation and posturing, grounding it in reality. In Florida, the realization that students who were passing the state's standards test were not necessarily ready for college coursework helped move the college-readiness agenda at the Department of Education and in the legislature.
- > *Faculty must play a central role in understanding and addressing college-readiness gaps.* Particularly for college-readiness efforts that directly touch on instruction (e.g., success on standardized tests, placement into courses), high school and college faculty need to work together to clarify expectations and determine how to help students meet them.

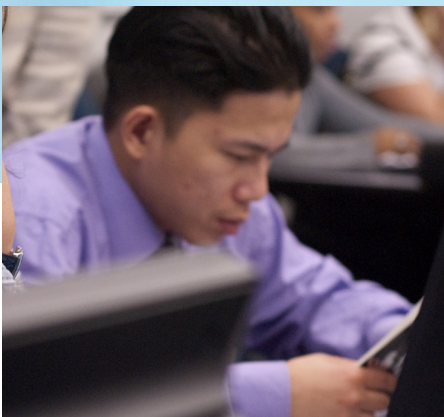
In addition, Florida's experience suggests some more specific lessons for states looking to base their efforts around a readiness test:

- > *To use a common assessment for placement requires agreement across colleges about entry-level competencies.* Ensuring that that is the case across colleges may be the most difficult aspect of the work.
- > *Using a common test at the state level increases negotiating power with test vendors.*
- > *Vendor cost need not be prohibitively high.* Florida managed to develop a new assessment with no up-front vendor cost. The main costs were the time of faculty and staff to work on test development. (This model may become less tenable when test developers have on hand items developed by early adopting states and are in a position to start charging other states to use them.)
- > *Test development is highly labor-intensive.* The more customized the test, the more labor-intensive it will be to develop. Psychometric analysis may require close work with a test developer, but states may want or need in-house expertise as well. In Florida, the state's K-12 assessment unit donated staff time to assist with analysis.
- > *Cut scores need to reflect the level at which students can succeed in college-level courses.* States will need to use interim cut scores until enough data are generated to determine definitive cut scores. Ultimately, the hardest work is not choosing that level but helping students reach it.

**FLORIDA'S EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS SOME MORE SPECIFIC LESSONS FOR STATES LOOKING TO BASE THEIR EFFORTS AROUND A READINESS TEST.**

- > *Additional features—such as diagnostics—make the test longer, possibly prohibitively so.* Though the initial concept of PERT included a diagnostic assessment, the issue of test length dictated separating the PERT Placement from the PERT Diagnostic.
- > *Partnerships involving using college assessments and courses in high schools require considerable coordination.* Issues like scheduling, funding, and computer security are among many factors that inhibit high schools from adding assessments and transitional courses.
- > *High schools may not offer readiness testing or senior-year transitional courses to all eligible students unless mandated to do so.* Florida added college-readiness measures to the state's high school grading system before ultimately requiring that high schools offer the courses to all students who score within a specified range on PERT.

Florida's college-readiness landscape has been shifting for at least seven years, and those shifts will continue for at least a few more—through the implementation of the Common Core standards and related assessments. While the outcomes of this work will be unknown for several more years, the process that Florida undertook in developing its recent reforms stands out for its clarity of vision, strength of leadership, and responsiveness to evidence. Florida has emerged as a national leader within the federally funded assessment consortia, largely because of its background in developing college-readiness policies. If the state begins to see the kinds of improvements in student success that officials there expect, its role as a place to emulate will only be solidified.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Southern Regional Education Board, "SREB Tools to Help States Adopt a College and Career Readiness Agenda," Accessed July 19, 2011, [http://www.sreb.org/page/1507/how\\_sreb\\_helps.html](http://www.sreb.org/page/1507/how_sreb_helps.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Michael W. Kirst and Andrea Venezia (2005) write that "admissions and placement standards . . . communicate signals, meaning, and expected behavior to students and secondary schools."
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example: Collins (2008) and Prince (2005), two JFF policy briefs that address the issue of consistency across colleges.
- <sup>4</sup> See: Dr. Judith Bilsky. *Go Higher Florida!* Task Force presentation, October 11, 2007, accessed July 19, 2011, [http://www.fldoe.org/cc/gohigher/2007\\_10\\_11/agenda.asp](http://www.fldoe.org/cc/gohigher/2007_10_11/agenda.asp).
- <sup>5</sup> For data on Florida's remediation rates, see: Florida Department of Education, "Performance on Common Placement Tests," accessed July 19, 2011, <http://www.fldoe.org/articulation/perfCPT/default.asp>.
- <sup>6</sup> The attention to improving students' success upon entry to college coincided with reforms that allowed more of the two-year colleges to offer four-year degrees. By 2008, state legislation would allow many of the colleges to change their names from "community college" to "state college" or simply "college."
- <sup>7</sup> See: Florida Association of District School Superintendents, "Task Force on High School Reform," accessed July 19, 2011, [http://www.fldoe.org/hsreform/FADSS\\_PositionPaper.asp](http://www.fldoe.org/hsreform/FADSS_PositionPaper.asp).
- <sup>8</sup> Public universities, though briefly governed by the same board, moved to independent governance in 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> For more on the process of developing the PERT, see: Florida Department of Education, November 2010, *Florida's Postsecondary Education Readiness Test*.
- <sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.fldoe.org/articulation/perfCPT/default.asp>.
- <sup>11</sup> In late June, Pearson also announced a new collaboration with the College Board to bring together Pearson's online instructional products with the new diagnostic version of ACCUPLACER. The effort appears directly aligned with Florida's pursuits.
- <sup>12</sup> For further thoughts about cut scores, see: Collins (2008).

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