

TESTING GROUND

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

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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.

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 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.

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.

Testing Ground is available at www.jff.org/publications/education/testing-ground-how-florida-schools-and-c/1307.

September 2011

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