

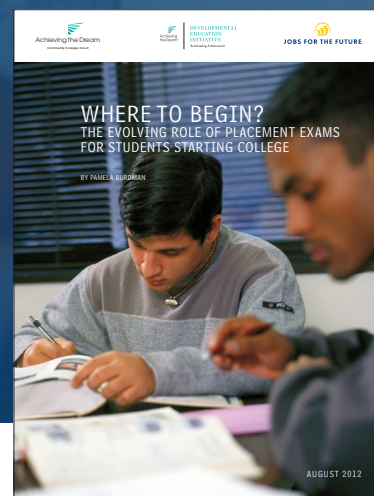
# WHERE TO BEGIN?

## THE EVOLVING ROLE OF PLACEMENT EXAMS FOR STUDENTS STARTING COLLEGE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For years, colleges have used placement exams to determine whether to deem incoming students “college ready” or assign them to developmental education. But emerging information reveals the tests have little correlation to students’ future success, casting doubt on their use even as the high stakes for students of taking remedial courses become clear. Educators are rethinking whether the tests are fair and wondering if their traditional use constitutes a barrier to college completion.

For many states, efforts to strengthen the college readiness of high school graduates and improve college completion rates have created pressure to develop a coherent statewide policy framework for placement assessment. Systems are exploring reforms that range from adopting new tests and deemphasizing test scores to creating new policies for test preparation and administration. As they do, they seek guidance and models.

In spring 2012, Jobs for the Future convened state officials and community college leaders—including representatives from the Achieving the Dream, Developmental Education Initiative, and Completion by Design state policy networks—to discuss research and innovations in placement and assessment and how they might help improve outcomes for students traditionally served by developmental education. Supplementing those discussions with interviews and analysis, *Where to Begin?* explores the various ways states and systems are grappling with new, sometimes confusing, information about placement exams as part of broader student success initiatives.

## RESEARCH CHALLENGES ASSUMPTIONS

While changes in placement testing policies have come about through a variety of motives and mechanisms, many have been informed by new research. A plethora of studies on a range of topics related to student success has chipped away at many assumptions long shaping thinking about college readiness, creating a new narrative about how best to serve students.

While the traditional narrative casts placement exams as low-stakes tests that help students by ensuring they take the appropriate classes, the new narrative emphasizes the role of colleges in facilitating student progress toward graduation. The reform narrative, which underscores the high-stakes nature of consigning students to noncredit remedial sequences with unclear effectiveness, is comprised of five key elements:

**Placement exams are high-stakes tests.** Research challenges the traditional notion that placement exams are low-stakes tests, affecting at most a few courses a student takes. In fact, placement into a developmental course can affect a student’s entire educational trajectory, putting additional barriers in the way of a college education.

**The effectiveness of traditional developmental education is unclear.** Students placed into developmental classes are unlikely to complete college. That has been considered the result of poor preparation, but there is increasing scrutiny about whether the developmental experience improves student outcomes.

**Accelerating some students through or out of developmental courses seems promising.** According to early evaluations, some experiments with condensing students’ time in developmental courses have led to better outcomes for some students.

**Placement exams are weak predictors of success in gateway courses.** In fact, high school grades do a better job. Of particular concern are findings that many students required to take remedial classes could have succeeded in college-level coursework.

**Math and English assessments provide at best a narrow picture of students' readiness for college.** Placement tests do not measure many of the skills needed for college success—including persistence, motivation, and critical thinking. And only some students need most of the assessed math skills.

The system of placing and remediating students appears to have veered away from its intended goals. Still, it is one thing to realize this and another to determine how changes in placement policies and exams figure into broader developmental reforms. Three broad categories of innovations are being explored: downplaying the tests; changing the tests; and supporting students around the tests.

## DOWNPLAYING THE TESTS

While no state has stopped using placement tests altogether, many are making them less prescriptive or becoming less stringent about requiring students to be assessed. This downgrading takes several forms:

**Multiple measures:** In most states, test scores constitute the only basis for assigning students to remedial classes. Systems are now implementing or considering adding high school grades and other measures.

**Test waivers:** While waiving placement tests based on high SAT or ACT scores has been common, systems are considering high school performance and other additional grounds for placing students directly into college-level courses.

Also being explored are practices such as mainstreaming students into college-level courses with extra support, basing placement on students' academic goals, and allowing them to make their own placement decisions.

## CHANGING THE TESTS

Several states are considering new assessment instruments to bolster efforts to improve students' preparation in high school as well as their outcomes in college. Systems are seeking several key features in these assessments and looking past off-the-shelf assessments to those that are customized for each state.

**Customized assessments:** Several states are adopting assessments aligned with their curricula.

**Diagnostic assessments:** These could offer more information on students' strengths and weaknesses than traditional cutoff scores. However, states vary in how they define "diagnostic."

Colleges and systems are also exploring whether they can better help students by assessing cognitive strategies (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving) as well as non-cognitive factors (e.g., persistence, motivation).

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS AROUND TESTS

Concerns about high developmental education enrollments also drive changes in policies related to test preparation and testing conditions. Systems and colleges are exploring strategies to ensure that rusty skills or a bad day do not relegate students to remedial courses they may not need.

**College-readiness tests and courses in high school:** Some systems have adopted programs or policies for eleventh graders to take college placement tests, based on the theory that the tests send a signal to high schools about the preparation students need.

**Other test preparation assistance:** Many students do not realize the high stakes of placement tests; also, severe placement errors are common. These facts suggest that some students could bypass developmental education if they brushed up on their skills in math or English. Colleges experimenting with this approach report early success.

## THE NEXT ROUND OF RESEARCH

As colleges and systems make choices—on their own or as a result of legislative mandates—the field will need greater understanding about how the new policies are implemented as well as about their results. Key questions for researchers include:

- > Are the new customized assessments more predictive of student performance than the off-the-shelf tests of the past?
- > Do efforts to better prepare students and increase awareness of the high-stakes nature of placement tests lead to higher scores and better predictive value?
- > What strategies best serve underprepared students?

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*Where to Begin?* is available on the JFF website at <http://www.jff.org/publications>

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