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Creating Opportunities or Building Barriers: Framing Policy for Placement Testing as an Impactful Part of the First-Year Experience

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Every year in the United States countless first-year college students, although fully eligible to attend college, discover that they are not academically prepared for postsecondary studies. After the elation of accepting an offer of admission to a university, more often than not these students are then ambushed with the gate-keeping directive that they are required to take placement tests in math, reading, and/or writing before they can register for their classes. Frequently, placement testing is also a prerequisite for entry-level core academic courses.

This brief will review recent statewide mandates regarding college readiness standards and placement testing in Kentucky. The University of Kentucky's Department of Academic Enhancement offers a model of best practices for others in higher education to consider when determining or evaluating placement testing policy and implementation.

Purposes of Placement Testing

Placement tests are designed to determine whether incoming students are prepared for college-level coursework. Typically, results are used to determine if a student has mastered the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for entry-level, credit-bearing courses in reading,

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writing, and math, as well as foreign languages. Placement test results may also be used for diagnostic purposes, for documenting student progress, or for assessing courses or program effectiveness. Placement tests are touted for predicting academic success, but, as discussed later in this commentary, important questions exist regarding the efficacy of placement tests in comparison to measures such as the ACT or SAT.

Kentucky Mandate

Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) mandated a common set of college readiness indicators that enforce a statewide, unified measure based on standardized test scores:

A state-supported university that admits a student in [a]...baccalaureate degree program who does not meet the system-wide standards of readiness for English, mathematics, or reading shall use a placement exam to place the student in the proper course. If the student scores below the system-wide standard of readiness in English, mathematics, or reading as outlined in the College Readiness Indicators document incorporated by reference, a university shall place the student in an:

- (a) Appropriate developmental course in the relevant discipline within two (2) semesters following a student's initial enrollment; or
 - (b) Appropriate entry-level college course within two (2) semesters following a student's initial enrollment, if the course is a supplemental course or program
- (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2010).

As illustrated in Figure 1, these readiness standards are based on ACT test sub scores and are at or below the score levels recommended by ACT, Inc.

Subject Area	CPE Required Sub-Score ACT or SAT	College Readiness Benchmark Scores recommended by ACT, Inc.
English/Writing	18 or 450	18
Mathematics	19 or 460	22
Reading	20 or 470	21

Figure 1. Comparing Kentucky mandated readiness standards to those recommended by ACT, Inc.

Kentucky's CPE endorsed the COMPASS as one of several placement tests deemed appropriate for determining college readiness. COMPASS is an untimed, adaptive, computer-based, proctored test that helps colleges evaluate students' skills and place them into appropriate courses. The University of Kentucky (UK) decided to offer free administration of the COMPASS for a single testing platform in reading, writing, and math for both prospective and current UK students.

COMPASS scores indicate areas in which students are prepared and areas that need further development. Ideally, COMPASS identifies problems in major subject areas before they disrupt a student's educational progress, giving her or him the opportunity to prepare more effectively for needed courses (ACT, Inc., 2006). Students who score below the CPE established minimum score for demonstrating college readiness are assumed to have gaps in their academic preparation and are required to take one or more developmental or supplemental courses to learn prerequisite material for credit-bearing courses.

UK Academic Enhancement Model for Placement Testing

In December 2010, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education at UK charged the Department of Academic Enhancement with coordinating all placement testing administration at UK. Academic Enhancement (AE) is a central academic resource center that

serves all students at the university. AE offers a range of co-curricular academic support programs and services in a student-friendly environment. AE programs and services are student-responsive, purposefully student-centered, and designed to foster interactions that promote learning and attitudes towards academic life that are characteristic of successful college students. The mission of Academic Enhancement is to enhance all students' academic experiences as early and as often as possible (Mission & History, n.d.). In January 2011, placement testing communications and procedures were reviewed and revised by AE professional academic support staff to align with a more student-friendly experience.

Situating placement testing within the purview of UK Academic Enhancement is ideal, making testing part of the continuum of academic resources in support of student success. AE's signature program is a unique model of free, drop-in peer tutoring for entry-level coursework. During the academic year 2010-2011, AE provided more than 17,500 tutoring sessions for over 50 courses. Now that placement testing is situated within AE, students whose placement test scores indicate that they need additional academic support are right where they need to be, accessing AE programs and services early and often.

Impact and Unintended Consequences of Placement Testing

Placement testing may seem simple, straightforward, and harmless to policy makers and campus administrators. Yet, placement tests can create barriers to successful transitions from high school to college. How placement tests are implemented influences students' very first experiences with the institution and may impact students' impressions of academe and their sense of self-efficacy. The vignettes below are summaries of actual student experiences at UK and demonstrate the powerful impact that any early experience can have on student transitions.

Student Perspectives

Lauren, from Alabama, drove all the way to Kentucky to take her math placement test, because she was so upset about it. Lauren could have taken the test online at her home in Alabama, but arrived on campus in tears. Her ACT score indicated that UK required her to take the calculus placement test, even though Lauren did not want to enroll in calculus and did not plan to pursue a major that required calculus (Beach & Breslin, 2012).

Ben, from Kentucky, took the ACT five times in an attempt to improve his math ACT sub-score of 18. He was then required to take the COMPASS math placement test. Subsequently, Ben took the COMPASS three times to achieve a score that would enable him to enroll in a credit-bearing math course. Once he finally scored high enough on the COMPASS, Ben was then told he was required to take yet another math department required placement test to gain entry to the college Algebra course required by his intended major (Beach & Breslin, 2012).

Lauren and Ben were each first-time, first-year college students who clearly were quite anxious about the requirements placed upon them regarding placement testing. Scant research is available to document the real impacts that these experiences have on student transitions. Still, these examples of actual student experiences suggest that every interaction a new student has with an institution can be critical to shaping the success of their first year.

Implications

In most cases, placement testing only serves to confirm placement decisions based on benchmarks for standardized test scores. Placement testing does not substantially mitigate the number of students who need to enroll in developmental or supplemental courses (Beach & Breslin, 2012). During the 2010-2011 academic year, only 16% of math placement tests administered at UK actually placed students differently than their ACT scores (Beach & Breslin,

2012).

Inadvertently, placement tests can cause anxiety and anguish for students before they even enroll in their first college class (Beach & Breslin, 2012). Testing information may be available on college websites or brochures, but students often do not realize the importance of that information for decisions related to course access. Yet, lack of effective communication among guidance counselors, families, and students results in little incentive or means to prepare for high-stakes placement tests; they are not informed about content before they take it, nor are they provided with a full analysis of their performance following the test. Many students do not understand the rationale behind the tests and that the results may determine the courses that they will be allowed to take. Additionally, placement testing materials are not comparable to the typically glossy, high-quality marketing and recruitment materials students receive from university admissions offices. Students who are excited to receive an offer of admission may be surprised and confused by the message of required placement tests and the impact that placement testing scores will have on course/major selection and time to degree.

Model for Best Practices in Placement Testing

Placement test results should be used as just one of many tools for educators to better support student learning and development. Placement testing policies, and the general lack of consideration of the first-year experience, need to be reviewed regularly and assessed for validity and placement accuracy. Assessment of the process, communications, and the students' experiences, as well as student success in the courses in which they are placed represent a worthwhile endeavor. Policies need to be evaluated to ensure that students are in fact placed into courses that will maximize the probability of their success. However, research on the topic is limited, which makes it difficult to make definitive statements regarding the efficacy of

placement tests in addition to mandatory standardized test scores. Scott-Clayton (2012) reiterates this point when she writes, “While there is a long history of empirical research into the predictive validity of college entrance exams, only a handful of studies have examined these high-stakes college placement exams. Most of these studies have been conducted by the test makers themselves” (p. 2).

UK Academic Enhancement professional staff conceptualizes placement testing as part of an integral process designed to support student success that begins when a student applies to the university and continues through her or his first several semesters. Stakeholders work together purposefully to foster a positive, welcoming atmosphere where placement testing is understood as an opportunity to provide meaningful information and experiences for students, faculty, and staff.

In an effort to focus on student success rather than punitive gatekeeping or mandatory compliance, Enrollment Management (EM) and Undergraduate Studies (US) partnered with Academic Enhancement to create the Academic Preparation Program (APP). The APP for Student Success is designed to identify and communicate with students beginning when they submit their applications for admission and to provide a comprehensive continuum of support once they matriculate (Academic Preparation Program, n.d.). AE designed a testing and programming structure that incorporates the components of the APP into existing university resources. Students can access the existing full continuum of academic resources available to all UK students in support of their success, not only during the first semester or two, but also all the way to graduation. The CPE mandate for testing and programming is met along the way as a matter of course (documented and monitored), but sustaining students’ academic success is the ultimate objective (Breslin & Lewis, 2012).

Academic Enhancement has implemented a new model for developmental placement testing as part of the APP. Rather than focusing purely on the functional goal of assessing where a student is in a particular discipline, this model re-conceptualizes placement testing as an integrated piece of the student experience at the university. Placement testing planning and implementation now include a specific communications plan that begins delivering information to students during the application process. All students who qualify for auto-enrollment in APP receive a conditional offer of admission that includes ways for the student to strengthen her or his application to the university. Among these options are placement tests that students will be required to take if admitted. Encouraging students to complete the tests at this early stage in their relationship with the institution helps reinforce the student's responsibility for her or his education while demonstrating to the university that the student is serious about achieving academic goals. Further communications outline that if the student accepts the offer, she or he will be participating in the APP, which includes assignment to an undergraduate studies exploratory advisor and pre-enrollment in:

- UK 101, University Academic Orientation
- One or more supplemental APP courses in reading, writing, or math based on placement test results (includes individualized, self-paced curriculum and regular meetings with a Peer Educator)
- Participation in AE's Peer Tutoring Program and other academic support resources
- Frequent progress reviews

After students matriculate to the university and have completed their initial placement tests, AE monitors student progress through the developmental coursework. At the conclusion of the first semester, students typically retake the placement test, creating a pre/post dataset that can be used

as part of an assessment plan to evaluate the efficacy of the APP.

Conclusion

One of the significant challenges higher education faces is how to best serve all students in an increasingly diverse and global population. With economic crises resulting in fewer resources, how do we support the successful transition, retention, and persistence of students in pursuit of their degrees? In regards to placement tests, it appears that postsecondary institutions may inadvertently be offering students admission under false pretenses, or, at the very least, giving certain conflicting messages.

First-year students in the throes of a challenging transition from high school to college academic life, while attempting to navigate the new culture of academe, typically remain unaware and confused about the content, format and purpose of placement tests and the implications for the use of the results. It remains an open question regarding the usefulness of placement test scores in helping to predict who is likely to do well in a college level course or who is likely to fail (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Colleges and institutions continue to require placement tests yet fail to acknowledge the significance of the experience of the testing process for the students. Many colleges barely mention the tests to incoming students prior to the administration of the tests. Additionally, institutions often do a poor job of communicating the impact of the placement test on course prerequisites and degree timetables.

Rather than treating placement testing as an abstract silo of activity that is separate from other aspects of the transition from high school to college, UK has worked to carefully integrate testing into the first-year experience and create initiatives that address student readiness within a positive and integrated support system for academic success. Tailoring a seamless process beginning with admissions communications and continuing to provide information and

support throughout the student's undergraduate career can help make placement testing a useful tool rather than another punitive requirement that students are simply expected to endure.

Placement testing has become ubiquitous on college campuses even while those supporting students in their transition from high school to college often ignore it. Assessment of placement tests, policies, and processes remains necessary for creating well-aligned systems of support across student services and academic affairs. Placement tests have the potential to be an important part of our commitment to student success and persistence to degree, and they should be viewed as and communicated to students as an opportunity to strengthen their commitment to higher education.

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