



Diagnostic Assessment
**CHALLENGES &
OPPORTUNITIES**
for the California Community Colleges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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In January 2012, the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges adopted recommendations from the legislatively mandated Student Success Task Force. This included a recommendation that California's community colleges develop diagnostic assessments for use across the system. These would provide detailed information about each student's specific academic strengths and weaknesses. If implemented, they would be a component of new assessments that all community colleges in the state would use to place under-prepared students into "developmental" English and math courses below the college level.

One goal of this recommendation is for the diagnostic information to enable faculty at individual colleges to make adjustments to their developmental curricula to better serve under-prepared students.

As California takes on this challenge, it can learn from the experiences of several states that have already developed, or are developing, statewide diagnostic tests for their community colleges. These states' reforms are still in their infancy, and how they will play out over the long term is not yet clear. But their efforts help clarify the crucial issues for California to consider and how the ambitious reforms envisioned by the Task Force might differ from those being undertaken in other states.

*this is an
executive summary
of a longer report*

This LearningWorks report was prepared in association with EdSource, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization engaging Californians on key education challenges. One key goal was to examine the experiences of three other states that have been deeply engaged in developing statewide diagnostic assessments for their community colleges. The principal author of the report was Matthew Rosin, Ph.D., senior research associate at EdSource. Matt worked with a team from LearningWorks to develop the report, including Linda Collins, Robert Gabriner and Darrick Smith, as well as Louis Freedberg from EdSource.

The report can be downloaded from the *LearningWorks* and *EdSource* websites.

LearningWorks was founded by the Career Ladders Project for California Community Colleges, the Research and Planning (RP) Group for California Community Colleges, and the California Community Colleges Success Network (3CSN) to facilitate, disseminate and fund practitioner-informed recommendations for changes at the system and classroom levels, infusing these strategies with statewide and national insights.



The purpose of diagnostic assessments

The purpose of diagnostic assessment is to provide insight into entering students' specific strengths and weaknesses relative to key competencies that community college faculty, based on their understanding of their disciplines, believe are essential to make progress toward enrolling in college-level courses. These competencies could be the same for all programs of study a student might undertake, or could vary depending on a student's goals.

With such information, colleges could potentially:

1. Place a student into academic support, such as a small course module, that focuses on specific areas of weakness highlighted by the test.
2. Help faculty tailor classroom instruction in developmental courses, in light of what their students do and don't understand about the course content when they enter.

One of the Student Success Task Force's goals in recommending statewide diagnostic assessments is to help inform subsequent efforts by faculty to adjust their developmental curricula locally, with students' actual needs more clearly

in mind. This vision is in keeping with the state's tradition of local control over the developmental curriculum. Developmental course sequences vary in length among California's colleges, and also differ with respect to whether they formally integrate developmental writing and reading to some degree.

The statewide Chancellor's Office has been laying the groundwork for a centrally managed system for delivering assessments to colleges via the Internet called CCCAssess. Arguments in favor of such a system include that a statewide assessment would send a clearer signal to K-12 students about colleges' expectations, provide economies of scale to reduce the per-test cost of assessing students, and provide students access to practice tests via the Internet.

However, the idea of a statewide assessment has often been at odds with California's strong tradition of local control. And whether the presence of diagnostic tools makes a statewide assessment more attractive will likely depend on how a department has approached the reform of developmental education to date. At least some faculty worry that statewide assessment reform without clear curricular goals could reinforce approaches to developmental education they feel are ineffective.

Lessons learned from other states

The experiences of Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina provide perspective on the idea of statewide diagnostic assessment. Each state is in the early stages of a major effort to redesign how it delivers developmental instruction and assesses whether students need it.

Florida is implementing a new assessment system for its community colleges. The diagnostic part of the system is intended to determine the specific strengths and weaknesses of students who are placed into one of two developmental course levels in math, writing, or reading. But concern about the amount of time that students would be involved in taking the tests resulted in these diagnostic tests being made voluntary for Florida's community colleges.

Virginia, which redesigned its developmental math curriculum as small course modules, is implementing new diagnostic assessments for placing students into the specific math modules they still need. How many math modules a student must master also depends on his or her program of study. For example, a liberal arts student is required to master fewer modules than are students in math-intensive majors.

North Carolina, which is pursuing small course modules in mathematics and English, is calling for a statewide diagnostic assessment system to place students into the modules they need. Unlike in Florida and Virginia, where the diagnostic tests that students take (if any) hinges on how they perform on placement tests, North Carolina plans to go directly to diagnosing students' specific strengths and weaknesses. The approach could result in more students being identified as needing at least some developmental education, but the modular curriculum design could mean that many students will need less time to finish it.

In these states, prior agreement about the developmental curriculum—whether in the form of a two-level sequence or a series of small course modules—provided a common basis for deciding which topics need diagnostic attention, how these topics relate to one another, and even which students should be tested in each of these areas. This contrasts with the vision outlined by California's Student Success Task Force, in which faculty would use the information produced by a new diagnostic test to retool their developmental courses at a later stage in their own colleges. Per the Task Force recommendation, a new statewide assessment “must be diagnostic to ensure placement into appropriate coursework and to inform local [faculty] as they design appropriate curriculum.”

The experiences of Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina also show that, though diagnostic tests provide more specific information about what students do and don't know about a subject, they come at a price: the extra time it takes for students to take the tests.

California's challenge will be to devise a process whereby representative groups of faculty collaborate and agree on the essential competencies on which diagnostic assessments in their respective fields should focus, granting that their local curricula may address these in different ways. Colleges with different approaches to developmental education may need flexibility to target diagnostic items to students in the way that best fits their local circumstances.

Another potential topic for discussion is whether the competencies needed to make progress toward enrolling in college-level courses are the same or different depending on a student's preferred program of study, and whether a student's declared program should have any bearing on the diagnostic test items that he or she sees.

Colleges will need to consider how much time students should spend taking tests and how their campus testing centers will accommodate it. If departments wish to use diagnostic information to tailor in-class instruction to students' needs, colleges will need to establish processes for providing this data to faculty and support them in using it.

And if the goal is to help faculty make adjustments or even large revisions to their local curricula as needed, colleges will need to provide institutional research support and time for faculty to review diagnostic data, make sense of it, and evaluate the outcomes of curricular reforms that result.

Linking community college reforms to K–12 schools

California's K–12 system is undertaking its own reforms related to college readiness. That makes this a key moment for the K–12 and community college systems to consider how best to bridge their expectations for students and the assessments they use to evaluate performance, and minimize any mixed signals that students who make the transition between the two systems receive. But this will take substantial coordination.

In 2010, the California State Board of Education adopted Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. In addition, California is a voting, or "governing," member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which is one of two consortia of states to which the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to develop new assessments for the Common Core. The Smarter Balanced assessments are expected for the 2014–15 school year.

Of particular relevance for community colleges, the 11th grade summative assessments being developed by Smarter Balanced are intended to provide a new measure of college readiness. One possibility is that California students who are deemed "college ready" as 11th graders would not need to take a placement test when they enroll in college. Ideally, interven-

tions offered to under-prepared students during high school would reduce their later need for developmental education in community college. California's Early Assessment Program is a model for how such "early signaling" to high school students about their college readiness might work.

The Student Success Task Force recommends that the community college and K–12 systems develop "common standards for college and career readiness that are aligned with high school exit standards." If undertaken, such work could raise questions about California's formal exit standards for high school, about students' course-taking patterns in high school, and about whether college readiness and career readiness are, in fact, the same.

Various aspects of Common Core implementation provide further opportunities for coordination. For example, the Task Force recommends that college faculty work with K–12 to ensure that any new diagnostic assessments adopted for community colleges do not work at cross-purposes with the new standards and assessments that will guide California schools. And community college leaders hope to play a role in developing new curriculum frameworks for K–12 schools aligned with the Common Core.



Conclusion

For the full report on which this executive summary is based, go to the Learning Works or EdSource website.

A fundamental question now facing California is whether statewide diagnostic assessments can be an effective lever for improving student success, especially because the state's community colleges differ in how they structure the developmental curriculum and think about its goals. A closely related question is whether assessment reform, including the design of new diagnostic assessments, should precede reform of the developmental curriculum and its goals.

Also at stake is whether the respective assessment reforms undertaken by California's community college and K–12 systems will be guided by consistent academic goals for students as they move from one system to the next.

California's Student Success Task Force lays out a broad vision for reform of the state's community colleges, including new strategies for assessing incoming students. The reforms being instituted in other states should help inform what California does next. Now the task for community college leaders, administrators, and faculty is to get specific about what new assessments with diagnostic components can and should look like—and about how colleges will use diagnostic information to improve their developmental curricula with the ultimate goal of increasing student success across the system.