

Common Elements of Developmental Education Policies

Erin Whinnery and Sarah Pompelia

For many students, developmental education is the largest obstacle to college success, hindering progress before they ever enroll in a college-level course. [Research](#) shows that less than 10 percent of students placed in developmental education at community colleges complete their degree within three years, and only 35 percent of four-year college students in developmental education go on to graduate within six years. These outcomes can leave students with mounting educational debt and no degree to show for their work.

As a result, postsecondary practitioners and researchers have been re-examining and challenging many traditional elements of developmental education from [placement strategies](#) to the [sequence](#) of courses that students must take. Policymakers are taking note of the research and considering new policies at the institutional, system and state levels.

The policy examples reviewed in this resource demonstrate how states and postsecondary systems guide student assessment and placement into either college-level courses or developmental courses, encourage best practices with new instructional methods and establish accountability. Across the states, these policies address:

- College readiness assessments.
- Assessment cut scores.
- Multiple measures for course placement.
- Innovative course models.
- Reporting requirements.

This resource addresses these policy areas, aiming to help state policymakers and postsecondary leaders learn about policies that shape developmental education and how changes become codified.

Developmental education refers to the sub-college-level coursework students must complete when institutions determine they are not yet likely to succeed in college-level courses.

Most often, developmental education focuses on improving a student's math, English or reading/writing skills.

Because of the open-access mission of community colleges, many policies emphasize the role of two-year colleges in providing developmental education.

College Readiness Assessments

Postsecondary institutions use standardized assessments to evaluate a student's readiness for college-level coursework. The number of [approved placement assessments](#) in statewide or systemwide policy varies, from one to over 10. This highlights the lack of common criteria for college-course placement and common standards for college-readiness across the states. Because of these variances, it is possible that students with similar academic preparation can be assessed and placed differently depending on the state and/or postsecondary institution in which they enroll.¹

WHY IT MATTERS

Researchers consider these tests to be high-stakes assessments that “measure narrow sets of skills at a single (and potentially problematic) point in time.”² In [a case study](#) of assessment and placement practices at three community colleges, researchers observed that students frequently learned about the assessment requirement on the first day they arrived on campus. Rather than take home the review materials and return at a later time, many opted to sit for the assessment that same day. The researchers found this was not prohibited by policy or discouraged in practice, and many students did not understand the implications of not studying for the assessment. Despite concerns about when students should take their assessment, institutions may rely on a common and easy-to-schedule assessment in order to evaluate thousands of incoming students in an [efficient manner](#).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How consistent is the use of assessments across your state or postsecondary system?

What do practitioners in your state say about the efficacy of the assessments used in your state?

State Examples



In **Colorado**, the Commission on Higher Education defines an assessment as “[some sort of evaluation of a student's readiness](#)” that can include a standardized assessment score, an evaluation of a high school transcript or a conversation with an advisor. The commission lists several standardized assessments.



Minnesota State Colleges and University System [procedure designates](#) ACCUPLACER as the statewide placement assessment. However, if a student presents an ACT score that meets or exceeds the cut score, the student may be exempted from taking the ACCUPLACER and can be placed in courses based on the ACT score.



Texas [administrative code](#) requires all incoming college students to take a placement assessment prior to enrolling in freshman-level courses. It designates the Texas Success Initiative Assessment as the single statewide placement assessment. The TSI is administered by the College Board.

Assessment Cut Scores

A cut score is the lowest score a student can achieve on a standardized assessment to be placed into a college-level, credit-bearing course. Some states use a single cut score to determine course placement, while other states consider the assessment score as one factor among many in a review of a student's knowledge and academic ability.

WHY IT MATTERS

There is little consensus across states regarding college readiness.³ Evidence for this can be found in the range of ACT math college-readiness scores outlined in state and system policies. [Some policies indicate](#) a score of 19 is needed to be placed into college-level courses, while others require a 23. Additionally, research shows that assessment scores alone may not be the best indicator of a student's ability to succeed in college-level coursework.⁴ It is possible that placement decisions may result in putting students who are likely to succeed in college-level courses into developmental courses.⁵

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What national benchmarks or best practices inform your state's or postsecondary system's cut scores?

Are cut scores uniform across your state, or do they vary between postsecondary institutions?

State Examples

 **FLORIDA** [Administrative code](#) in **Florida** outlines cut scores for national and statewide assessment options. Students are not required to take a placement test or enroll in developmental education. However, students may opt to be assessed and be placed into developmental courses.

 **VIRGINIA** **Virginia** Community College System [policy](#) outlines math and English cut scores for approved assessments. Students who meet these scores are exempt from taking the community college placement test.

 **WEST VIRGINIA** **West Virginia** [state rules](#) outline assessment and placement standards for first-year, first-time students. Cut scores for math, English and reading are included. Students who do not meet one of the standards in a subject area must complete the required remediation.

Multiple Measures for Course Placement

Multiple measures refer to the inclusion of any alternative evidence, in addition to assessments, that a student may provide to demonstrate college readiness. Among policies that require or allow the use of multiple measures, high school GPA is the [most commonly identified measure](#). Other forms of evidence may include prior college or workforce experience and noncognitive factors such as motivation and interests.

WHY IT MATTERS

The use of high school academic performance in course placement decisions has been found to be “at least as useful as and often superior to placement test scores.”⁶ So far, case studies of institutions that have adopted multiple measures have identified getting access to students’ high school transcripts to be the [largest obstacle to implementation](#).⁷

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Many postsecondary systems have launched pilot projects or initiatives to begin using multiple measures; what efforts are underway in your state?

Implementing a new assessment placement practice can be resource intensive; does your state or system have the resources necessary to conduct a more holistic review of a students’ academic ability?

State Examples

 **CALIFORNIA** California [statute](#) requires community colleges to use one or more of the following pieces of evidence when determining course placement: high school coursework, grades and GPA.

 **MASSACHUSETTS** The **Massachusetts** Board of Higher Education [recently voted](#) to allow institutions to use high school GPA to place students directly into college-level courses.

 **NORTH CAROLINA** Community colleges in **North Carolina** [are required](#) to use a hierarchy of measures to determine college readiness. The measures include, in order of importance, unweighted high school GPA, ACT or SAT scores, and placement testing.



For a complete scan of state policies governing developmental education assessment and placement, see Education Commission of the States’ [50-State Comparison: Developmental Education Policies](#).

Innovative Course Models

As an alternative to stand-alone remedial courses, reform efforts have encouraged or required institutions to offer additional academic supports both inside and out of the classroom. Most commonly, changes to developmental education [instructional methods](#) include the addition of corequisite courses, which allow students to enroll in college-level courses while receiving additional and concurrent support. Other supports include peer tutoring or additional instruction and competency-based or compressed course offerings that allow students to move at their own pace or address specific areas of academic weakness in less time than a traditional course might take.

WHY IT MATTERS

Research on redesigned course models shows promising results for students. After corequisite courses were introduced at **Tennessee** community colleges, the number of students who passed their college-level math course increased fourfold.⁸ Similar outcomes improved among students enrolled in corequisite English courses at the Community College of Baltimore County in **Maryland**.⁹

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

New instructional delivery methods can be introduced through small, pilot projects or for all students at once. Which stakeholders in your state are best situated to consider a change in instructional delivery and determine at what scale to introduce new practices?

Measuring outcomes as a result of new instructional delivery requires detailed data-tracking. Does your state or system have the ability to study short- and long-term outcomes for impacted students?

State Examples



ARKANSAS

The **Arkansas** Higher Education Coordinating

Board [authorizes](#) colleges or universities to allow students to enroll in corequisite courses. Course design options also include opportunities to re-examine the length of time in which curriculum is reviewed, such as fast-track or compressed developmental education courses.



GEORGIA

In the University System of **Georgia**, [all students are](#)

[enrolled](#) in college-level courses with corequisite support by default — unless they meet exemption criteria (e.g., assessment scores or multiple measures). The two courses are coordinated and cover the same topics in the same order at the same time.



IDAHO

The **Idaho** State Board of Education [approved](#)

corequisite course models, embedded support models and competency-based emporium models (a technology-based program with individualized faculty instruction) for students who need additional academic support.

Reporting Requirements

Reporting allows states to assess the outcomes of students and programs across all institutions. One form of developmental education reporting, [high school feedback reports](#), broadly includes performance data for students who graduated from and enrolled in the state's public institutions. [Reporting can also include](#) the types of student populations (e.g., recent high school graduates) and characteristics of students (e.g., demographics or high school GPA) that enter developmental education and the cost of providing developmental education.

WHY IT MATTERS

Reporting provides states and systems with information they can use to improve education at the K-12 and postsecondary levels.¹⁰ It allows states to understand how many students enroll in developmental education courses, who those students are and the postsecondary success of those students. Information gleaned from high school feedback data or other forms of data may guide states and systems to provide supports for the students they serve and improve programs that struggle to meet the needs of students.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which data does your state require systems or agencies to report?

How does your state use developmental education reporting data to improve postsecondary education services?

State Examples



MINNESOTA

In **Minnesota**, the office of higher education must publish high school feedback data, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, free or reduced-price lunch eligibility and age. Other reporting requirements include student performance data.



NEVADA

Nevada statute requires the Nevada System of Higher Education to report high school feedback data to school districts that include the cost of remediating students in reading, writing or math.



NEW HAMPSHIRE

New Hampshire statute requires that each institution in the university and community college systems submit a report that includes the number and percentage of students who require developmental English, reading and math courses. The report must also include data on entry, withdrawal, transfers and degrees and certificates awarded.



For more information on the importance of developmental education and its challenges for students, see Education Commission of the States' [*Developmental Education: An Introduction for Policymakers*](#).

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About Strong Start to Finish



Strong Start to Finish at Education Commission of the States is a collaborative network working to significantly increase the number and proportion of low-income students, students of color and returning adults who succeed in college math and English and enter a program of study in their first year of college.

ENDNOTES

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10. *Roadmap for High School Feedback Reports: Key Focus Areas to Ensure Quality Implementation* (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2014), <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/roadmap-high-school-feedback-reports/>.