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2. Purpose and Role of Assessment: Is There Consensus?

2.1 Assessment and the Community College Open-Door Philosophy

The purpose of assessment is to sort students into different levels of content and instruction. All higher education involves sorting. Students applying to elite and other four-year institutions are sorted *before* admission, as colleges accept or reject them according to their test scores and other criteria. Less-advantaged students are sorted *after* they arrive at open-access institutions. It is the latter students, and the testing and placement process used to sort them, that we are concerned with here.

There has been significant discussion and debate over whether assessment helps or harms incoming students, particularly disadvantaged and minority students. As Kingan and Alfred (1993) frame the controversy, assessment can be viewed as a means of tracking and “cooling out” students’ college aspirations or as a means of facilitating students’ persistence and success; there is support for both views. Students placed in developmental education, particularly at the bottom level, have low odds of eventually moving on to credit coursework. On the other hand, the national trend appears to be toward state standardization of assessment and enforcement of mandatory placement.

Historically, the pendulum has swung somewhat in terms of how strictly assessment and placement procedures have been imposed on students. Community colleges from their inception have been open-door institutions and so have always had to wrestle with the question of how to educate entering students who are unprepared for college-level coursework. From the institutional point of view, the dilemma is framed in terms of the necessity of maintaining academic standards—by controlling entry into college-level courses—in institutions that admit all students (Hadden, 2000). Maintaining

standards is necessary to a college's legitimacy—that it is viewed rightfully as part of the postsecondary sector (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

For a short period during the 1970s, the mandatory testing, placement, orientation, and course prerequisites that had held sway earlier began to be eroded. Proponents of the “student’s right to fail” philosophy argued that community college students were adults who should have the freedom to make their own educational decisions, and that this freedom promoted responsibility (Rounds & Andersen, 1985; Zeitlin & Markus, 1996). But, by the end of the decade, these practices were reintroduced, prodded by both legislators and educators concerned with the costs of high failure and dropout rates (Cohen & Brawer; Rounds & Anderson, 1985).

Challenges were issued almost immediately, and the dilemma became a legal issue. In California, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed a lawsuit on behalf of minority students who claimed they were excluded from courses solely on the basis of placement examinations. While the state’s Matriculation Act of 1986 called for improved counseling services and the use of multiple measures in student placement, the use of test results to restrict course-taking was seen as widespread in the state. The lawsuit was dropped once the community college system chancellor pledged to issue a list of approved tests that were not ethnically or linguistically biased and to fund and enforce the multiple-measures criterion. MALDEF also challenged a state-developed test in Texas (the Texas Academic Skills Program, or TASP, test) as being biased against minority students (Kingan & Alfred, 1993).

Still, a review of this issue in the late 1990s (Fonte, 1997) concluded that the days of a “laissez-faire” approach to developmental education, in which remedial coursework is “voluntary and nondirective,” were over. A widely cited compilation of best practices in developmental education states that mandatory assessment is “a critical initial step in developmental education” that “must be supported by mandatory placement” (Boylan, 2002, pp.35–36). And, a number of studies over the last decade and a half have found that community college faculty and administrators support mandatory assessment and placement (Berger, 1997; Hadden, 2000; Perin, 2006). Faculty are frustrated when students enroll in courses for which they are not academically prepared; in addition to the

resulting challenges for the students, instructors find it challenging to teach a wide range of skill levels within the classroom.

Students would prefer not to be in remediation (Perin, 2006), but if assessment and placement are to be imposed on all students, some observers have emphasized the importance of also providing support services (Kingan & Alfred, 1993; Fonte, 1997; Prince, 2005; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). College advisors admit that many if not most students take placement tests without understanding their purpose or high-stakes nature (Safran & Visher, 2010). Interviews with community college students have found that they were unprepared for the content and format of the tests, that they were still confused about placement policies after taking the tests, and that many never met with a counselor to discuss their results and subsequent course-taking options (Nodine, Bracco, & Venezia, 2010; Behringer, 2008).

2.2 Current Assessment and Placement Policies

The brief historical review above demonstrates support among policymakers and educators for an assessment and placement process that places students in courses for which they have the skills to succeed. In the last decade, the debate has evolved to focus on whether institutions can best make these determinations themselves or if the process should be dictated by the state. Arguments for state-standardized assessment and placement policies are that they can ensure that students are prepared for college-credit courses; that they can establish a common definition of academic proficiency, helping to align secondary and postsecondary academic requirements and expectations; that they can help states measure performance across different colleges and track remedial program effectiveness; and that they facilitate transfer between colleges (Prince, 2005). Counterarguments cite the importance of institutional autonomy and particularly of institutional freedom to set policies and practices that take into account the particular needs of colleges' local populations. In addition, given the discomfort with placement determination based on a single test score, it seems necessary to preserve some institutional flexibility in placement.

Perin's categorization of variation in assessment and placement policy is useful in examining this issue across the states. Perin's five categories are: mandatory versus