STATE BOARD OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
Proposed Policy: Multiple Measures for Placement

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Contact: Dr. Sharon Morrissey
NCCCS Executive VP for Programs & Chief Academic Officer
Proposed NCCCS Policy Using High School Transcript GPA and/or Standardized Test Scores for Placement (Multiple Measures for Placement)

The proposed Multiple Measures for Placement Policy establishes a hierarchy of measures that colleges will use to determine students’ readiness for college-level courses:

1. A recent high school graduate who meets the specified GPA benchmark will be exempt from diagnostic placement testing and will be considered “college-ready” for gateway math and English courses.

2. If a recent high school graduate does not meet the GPA benchmark, the college will use specified ACT or SAT subject area test scores to determine placement.

3. If a recent high school graduate does not meet the GPA threshold or have college-ready ACT or SAT scores, the college will administer the diagnostic placement test to determine placement.

4. If an applicant does not have a recent high school transcript or ACT or SAT scores, the college will administer the diagnostic placement test to determine placement.

### Proposed Multiple Measures for Placement Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unweighted GPA = or &gt; 2.6 And FRC Code 1, 2, 3, or 4*</th>
<th>Student is college ready for any gateway math course and any course that has a DMA prerequisite. Colleges may require students with a GPA &lt; 3.0 enrolling in MAT 151, 155, 161, or 171 to take a supplemental math lab as a co-requisite.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unweighted GPA = or &gt; 2.6 And FRC Code 1, 2, 3, or 4*</td>
<td>Student is college ready for any English course up to and including English 111 and any course that has a DRE prerequisite. Colleges may require students with a GPA &lt; 3.0 enrolling in ENG 110 and ENG 111 to take a supplemental English composition lab as a co-requisite.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Unweighted GPA < 2.6 | College will evaluate subject-area ACT or SAT scores to determine if student is college ready in math and English using the following scores (based on national and state validation studies):  
  **English:** ACT Reading 20 OR ACT English 18  
  SAT Writing 500 OR SAT Critical Reading 500  
  **Math:** ACT Math 22  
  SAT Math 500 |
| Unweighted GPA < 2.6 and subject-area score(s) below college ready | Student will take the subject-area diagnostic assessment(s) to determine placement. (Colleges will continue to use Accuplacer, Asset or COMPASS until NC’s custom diagnostic assessment is fully implemented.) |
| Students without a recent transcript GPA or without ACT or SAT scores | Student will take the subject-area diagnostic assessment(s) to determine placement. (Colleges will continue to use Accuplacer, Asset or COMPASS until NC’s custom diagnostic assessment is fully implemented.) |
1. This policy is effective upon approval by the State Board of Community Colleges for students enrolling in Fall semester 2013. Colleges have up to two years to implement the policy; all colleges must implement the placement policy by Fall semester 2015.

2. This policy applies to an individual who has an official transcript grade point average (GPA) from a high school that is legally authorized to operate in North Carolina and who graduated from that high school within five years of college enrollment.

3. For students who apply for admission before they graduate from high school, colleges will consider a student’s cumulative GPA at the end of 12th grade or ACT/SAT test scores in determining placement.

4. Colleges will establish local policies regarding using GPA for placement for students graduating prior to 2013 who do not have FRC Codes* on their transcripts and for students with transcripts from out-of-state high schools.

5. Placement cut scores for diagnostic assessments will be developed for developmental math modules in Spring 2013 and for developmental reading/English in Spring 2014. Colleges must use State Board-approved cut scores to place students into the appropriate developmental math (DMA) module or reading/English (DRE) course.

6. Colleges will establish local policies to allow students who are assessed near college ready on the diagnostic assessment to co-enroll in a college course and the appropriate developmental education module/course that is a prerequisite for the college-level course.

7. The North Carolina Community College System will review student placement and success rates within two years of implementation of this policy and will report to the State Board of Community Colleges.

*Future Ready Core Transcript Code: Beginning with the 2013 graduating class, high school graduates’ transcripts will include a Future Ready Core (FRC) Code of 1 – 9. FRC Codes 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicate that a student’s high school course of study included Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, and a fourth math suitable for community college and/or university admissions. Both the unweighted high school GPA and the FRC Code will be included in the transcript data download that is being programmed to support the Multiple Measures of Placement Policy.
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NCCCS Academic & Student Services Policy Brief

Reconsidering How to Place Students Enrolling in North Carolina’s Community Colleges

Prepared by Cynthia Liston, NCCCS Associate Vice President for Policy Research
October 2012

Purpose
This policy brief depicts placement policy conversations taking place among North Carolina’s community colleges. It describes how students at North Carolina’s community colleges are currently placed into courses when they enroll and summarizes implications from new research causing the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) to reconsider its statewide placement policies.

Background
Last year 69 percent of recent high school graduates placed into at least one developmental (remedial) course when they enrolled in a North Carolina community college. This number has increased in recent years, and developmental education consumes approximately 10% of the community college budgets statewide.

Data indicate that the percentage of students who are placed into developmental courses and who successfully reach and pass first year English and Math courses is very low. In fact, for those at the lowest levels of developmental math, only 8 percent of students successfully make it through a gateway math course.¹

While no doubt many students have academic deficiencies, there is also national research indicating that many of these students would have persisted and been successful in college level courses had they been given the chance to enroll in them sooner. Many students lose motivation when faced with numerous developmental courses standing between them and college, and life challenges often intervene to prevent students from enrolling in and completing their required developmental courses. Research from other states indicates that a significant number of students who manage to bypass developmental courses they were supposed to take end up successfully completing college courses, a finding that casts doubt on current placement policies.²

Given the myriad issues surrounding developmental education and its importance to student success and completion, in 2009 NCCCS President Ralls established a statewide Developmental Education Initiative State Policy Team to focus on implementing strategies that increase the number of students enrolling in and successfully completing college level courses.

How NCCCS currently places students
There are currently three State Board-approved placement tests that NC community colleges must choose from to determine whether a student may be enrolled in college level courses, and there are
common “cut scores” for these tests that govern in which particular developmental courses a student is placed.

These assessments, however, will soon be replaced in North Carolina. In early 2012 the State Board approved a policy to adopt a new diagnostic placement test that is being custom-created to fit the System’s new redesigned developmental curricula. Following a competitive selection process, in March 2012 the State Board approved a contract with College Board to create this assessment. The math diagnostic assessment will be available in April 2013 and reading/English will be available one year later. By pinpointing specific weakness and dovetailing the test items with newly redesigned developmental curricula that is significantly more compressed, the new diagnostic assessments will lead to reduced developmental requirements for students.

New placement research considers multiple measures

Policy conversations surrounding placement, however, extend beyond assessments. Despite pending improvements in NCCCS placement tests, there are questions about whether any “single shot” high stakes test should be the only measure to place students. Researchers and test publishers have long recommended multiple measures as the best practice for assessment and placement of students. With this in mind, in 2011 the DEI State Policy Team’s Assessment and Placement committee contracted with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University’s Teachers College to study whether high school transcript data would provide value in accurately placing students at our community colleges.

The CCRC researchers “matched” college transcripts for about 20,000 NCCCS students with their high school transcripts, and in a study released early 2012 found that a student’s high school grade point average (GPA) was significantly more predictive of a student’s college success (as measured by the number of credits attained and college GPA) than test scores from the existing placement tests. The overall GPA holds similar predictive value for both math and English courses.

In addition, the study’s predictive modeling calculated that using high school GPA to place students would cut in half the number of students misplaced using current college placement tests, going from about 30 percent to about 15 percent.

While North Carolina’s new custom assessment being developed will, it is hoped, be more valid than current placement tests, this research indicates that high school GPA acts independently as a valid predictor of college success and therefore merits consideration as a measure to place students. (In fact, the validity of high school GPA for college placement is not entirely new and studies going back many decades have found it a useful predictor of college performance.)

The study’s authors suggest that high school GPA’s value as a predictor of college performance stems from the fact that it captures not only knowledge acquisition from courses throughout high school but also reflects students’ motivation, study habits, and persistence.

Potential new placement policy

As a result of this research, NCCCS is considering a new placement policy that would take into account high school grade point average, and widespread conversations about the proposed policy change are underway across our colleges. Under this policy, students who graduate within a specified period of time would be waived from taking a placement test and would be enrolled directly into credit-bearing
college courses. The policy being considered also proposes standardizing across our colleges the SAT and ACT scores above which students are exempt from placement testing.

Two particular challenges surrounding this policy are 1) determining the appropriate high school GPA cut-off above which students would be waived from placement testing and 2) determining how long the “shelf life” of the high school GPA should be, i.e., how long after graduation should a GPA be a valid measure for placement.

For the first challenge, the CCRC research provides some information that can be used to help guide decision-making. Based on the NCCCS student data, the predicted college GPA of a student is .6 lower than the student’s unweighted high school GPA. So, for example, students with an unweighted high school GPA of 2.8 are predicted to have a mean college GPA of 2.2. (Because it’s a median, it is important to keep in mind that half the GPAs would be predicted to fall below this value and half above, though the variance is not large, meaning most GPAs are predicted to cluster close to the mean.)

For the second challenge, guidance from the study is less clear. The CCRC research analyzed transcripts from students who had graduated from high school within two years and does not directly offer evidence on how much longer the high school GPA should be considered valid. In follow-up analyses the researchers did find evidence from other studies that high school GPA is associated with long-term benefits such as higher lifetime wages. Colleges anecdotally report that older returning students are among the most highly motivated students they serve and can successfully refresh their skills, particularly if their previous academic performance is fairly high. Nonetheless, it’s difficult to precisely determine the proper length of time to use a high school GPA as a valid measure for placement.

Next Steps

The North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents is currently considering a draft placement policy proposal that has been approved by the DEI State Policy Team’s Multiple Measures working group. It is anticipated that presidents will vote on the policy at their November 2012 meeting, and, depending on that outcome, the proposed policy may come to the State Board’s Program Committee in January 2013.

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i  NCCCS System Office data, and NC Achieving the Dream college cohort data 2002-05.
ii  Bailey, Thomas, Rethinking Developmental Education in Community College, CCRC, Columbia University, 2009.
iii  Belfield, Clive and Crosta, Peter, Predicting Success in College: The Importance of Placement Tests and High School Transcripts, Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2012.
Why Traditional Placement Testing Is Being Replaced by Multiple Measures

December 2012, Volume 25, Number 12

By Brad Bostian

Traditional placement testing currently places the majority of community college students into developmental classes. The tests are inexpensive, typically costing less than $10 per student, and they take about one hour and forty minutes to complete. The real costs of the tests come from their weakness as predictors of student performance in college, and the fact that only a minority of students will complete their prescribed developmental sequences. One solution might be to do what researchers and test publishers have long advised: use multiple measures to place students. Research going back decades has pointed the way to a multiple measures approach that includes the use of high school grades.

Problems with Placement Testing

Traditional placement tests, including ACT’s COMPASS and The College Board’s ACCUPLACER, are valid predictors of college performance. A student with maximum scores is more likely to succeed in college classes than a student with minimum scores. Even so, the correlation between placement tests and college grades is very small, meaning that tests only predict a small percentage of the variance in college grades and success rates. Somewhat better are admissions tests, also from The College Board and ACT. The SAT and ACT tests are stronger predictors of college performance, with a standard error of measurement around 7 percent of the score range, compared with roughly 10 percent of the score range for placement tests. Admissions tests also take longer and are considerably more expensive. In part, placement tests have been designed to community college specifications in order to keep the admissions door as open as possible by reducing hurdles, including time and expense. However, there is convincing evidence that placing students based on quick, efficient tests alone constitutes a false economy: it saves minutes and dollars now, but costs students additional semesters and thousands of dollars, and for institutions, means fewer completers and millions of dollars more in the long run.

Placement testing is based on the theory that by examining students’ content knowledge, college readiness can be determined. However, college readiness includes not only content knowledge, but other factors such as student expectations, motivation, finances, social and family situations, memory and intelligence, learning habits, and knowledge of the college environment. Placement of students into college-level classes without assessing these other factors limits the effectiveness of that placement.

A third problem with placement testing is the system into which it places students. Developmental course sequences often involve three or more non-credit course levels, and
fewer than 20 percent, sometimes fewer than 10 percent, of students ever complete these prescribed developmental course sequences. When the average student stays at a community college for only three semesters, it’s clear that the majority of students will not complete a credential.

Additional problems include the fact that placement tests use mostly multiple-choice questions that largely do not match the activities and assessments students are expected to perform in college classes. Placement tests do not diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses and so students are placed into semester-long experiences rather than having their particular needs addressed. In addition, most students do not study or review for the tests, and therefore underperform based on their ability. This is one significant reason why K-12 education looks as though it isn’t doing its job in preparing students for college. In fact, many more high school graduates could succeed when placed directly into college-level classes, if given the opportunity.

Better Ways of Assessing College Readiness

The perfect system of assessing overall college readiness would measure many factors, both content- and non-content related. Fortunately, there is a measure that incorporates most of the relevant factors. Since the 1920’s, researchers have studied the predictive power of high school grades—and admissions and intelligence tests—relative to college success. The earliest results were mixed, but it soon became apparent that the high school grade point average (GPA) is a better predictor of college success than tests. The GPA is also considered a multiple measure, since students earn a high GPA by exhibiting superior learning habits, having strong content knowledge, and maintaining high academic standards and expectations, as demonstrated across varied tests and assignments. Students attend school, do their homework, and comply with processes. Research has clearly confirmed high school GPA is a superior predictor of college success relative to placement and admissions tests, yet so far, high school GPA has largely been left off the table.

Why GPA? Why Not High School Math and English Grades?

Counterintuitive as it may be, grades in specific subjects aren’t nearly as good at predicting college course success, even for courses in the same discipline. This is because college readiness is so much more than content readiness. As a multiple measure, the GPA averages the student’s response to a variety of learning situations and procedural demands, as well as various instructor teaching methods and styles. It is that average that creates the predictive power. In addition, while placement tests are fast and efficient, GPA is potentially free and immediate.

Research performed by Clive Belfield and Peter Crosta (2012), from the Community College Research Center, assessed the relationship between North Carolina public high school transcript information and data from those students who attended one of the 58 colleges in the North Carolina Community College System. By far, unweighted high school GPA was the superior predictor of college success when compared with tests or even specific aspects of the high school transcript. The results were so convincing that the state is now considering a proposal to use high school GPA to place students into college level classes.

Putting Multiple Measures into Practice
There are two main ways to construct a system of multiple measures. One would be to combine measures into a formula, and use that to place students. For example, a formula could add a placement test score, the high school GPA, and the student’s reading level. Multipliers could be used to adjust the score scales to match each other, or to weight one or more measures more heavily, and a cut score could be established. A cut score is a minimum score level required for a student to place at a higher level. With a formula, the overall score would be the most important factor. This would allow a student with a very high placement score to have a somewhat lower high school GPA, or vice versa, in order to reach the overall cut score for the formula. From a technical perspective, this requires a relatively sophisticated information system, and students who have all the relevant measures. Many students don’t have a high school transcript, for example, or have one from a different state, country, or decade.

A simpler way to adopt multiple measures is to use one measure at a time, and this is the approach under consideration in North Carolina. If students have a high enough score on measure A, they can be placed at college level. If not, consider their scores on measure B, then C, and so on.

**What GPA to Use?**

Deciding what cut score to use is a political question, not a scientific one. When you raise the minimum score, you deny access to some students who would have been successful in college classes, and impede student progress by stacking up additional course requirements for those students. When you lower the score, students granted access to college-level classes may not be fully prepared for those classes, as they skip past developmental courses that may have helped them. However, recent research studies have shown that colleges are probably putting more students into developmental classes than will actually benefit from them academically.

Currently, approximately 60 percent of community college students take developmental classes, and up to 90 percent place into developmental classes when they take placement tests. The use of high school GPA can go a long way toward reversing those numbers.

In the North Carolina study (Belfield & Crosta, 2012), 52 percent of the students had high school GPAs of 2.5 or higher, and only 6 percent had high school GPAs of 3.5 or higher. Requiring a GPA of 3.5 would dramatically reduce the number of students benefiting from the proposed policy, while requiring a GPA of 2.5 would increase access while leaving college course success rates largely unchanged. Choosing the right level means balancing access with success in a way that limits developmental placement and increases program completion, without harming course success rates. This is possible because students with high grades in high school have already demonstrated academic success, but students who score high on placement tests have only demonstrated their content knowledge.

The North Carolina proposal will begin the placement process by seeing if students meet a minimum high school GPA threshold to place directly into college-level classes. Students falling below that level will be placed into college-level classes if they meet minimum scores on the ACT or SAT. Students not meeting either benchmark will be given a diagnostic placement test to determine what specific developmental courses or modules they need. The proposal will likely be presented to the State Board of Community Colleges in early 2013.
Conclusion

Community colleges have a unique but realistic chance to significantly reduce the time and cost of their students’ academic journeys simply by changing placement practices in a manner supported by research. A multiple measures approach using high school GPA for placement will not sacrifice educational quality, but it will further the completion agenda and help many more students to achieve their educational goals.

References


Brad Bostian is Director, First Year Experience, at Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina.

Opinions expressed in Leadership Abstracts are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the League for Innovation in the Community College.
### Proposed Multiple Measures for Placement Policy

#### Policy Development Timeline

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<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>January – November 2011</td>
<td>The Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) State Policy Team contracted with the Community College Research Center at Columbia University Teacher’s College to conduct a study of Multiple Measures for Placement using NC data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>Dr. Clive Belfield presented research findings to the DEI State Policy Team.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 25, 2012</td>
<td>Dr. Morrissey convened a Multiple Measures for Placement Committee of presidents, chief academic officers, and chief student development administrators to review research findings and develop a proposed policy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 22, 2012</td>
<td>Dr. Clive Belfield met with joint DEI State Policy Team and Multiple Measures for Placement Committee to explain the research study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 26, 2012</td>
<td>Dr. Tom Bailey, Director of the Community College Research Center, presented the research findings to the North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents (NCACCP). The NCACCP Program Committee discussed a first draft of a policy; this draft set the high school GPA at 3.0 and defined “recent high school graduate” as someone who had graduated within the past two years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 30, 2012</td>
<td>Chief Academic Officers and Student Development Administrators participated in a telephonic conference call to discuss the first draft of the policy. Administrators were asked to submit questions and feedback to Dr. Morrissey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 27, 2012</td>
<td>The Multiple Measures for Placement Committee met to finalize the policy; the committee changed the high school GPA to 2.6 and the definition of “recent high school graduate” to 10 years.</td>
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<td>October 7, 2012</td>
<td>The revised policy was discussed with the Presidents’ Association, the Community College Instructional Administrators Association, and the Student Development Administrators Association at the System Conference.</td>
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<td>October 30, 2012</td>
<td>The NCACCP Program Committee discussed the policy and changed the definition of “recent high school graduate” from 10 years to 5 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1, 2012</td>
<td>The Chief Academic Officers and Student Development Administrators participated in a telephone conference call to provide feedback from faculty and staff at the colleges. The majority supported a 3.0 GPA.</td>
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<td>November 8, 2012</td>
<td>The DEI State Policy Team reviewed the proposed draft and feedback from the colleges. The State Policy Team endorsed the GPA threshold at 2.6, as long as there could be an assurance that high school graduates had completed four units of high school math including Alg. II. The State Policy Team also added the option for colleges to require a supplemental math lab for students enrolling in college transfer math and English.</td>
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<td>November 15, 2012</td>
<td>The Presidents’ Association voted to change the required implementation date from fall semester 2014 to fall semester 2015. Following that action, the Association endorsed the proposed policy as amended by the DEI State Policy Team, with a recommendation to the State Board of Community Colleges for approval for implementation beginning fall semester 2013.</td>
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Additional High School GPA Data Analysis

By Brad Bostian, Director of First Year Experience, Central Piedmont Community College and Chair, DEI State Policy Team Placement and Assessment Committee

The following charts provide additional analysis of the dataset used by Belfield/Crosta in their multiple measures research. The dataset contains more than 20,000 NCCCS students who enrolled in our colleges between Fall 2008 and Summer 2010 and includes their high school transcript information, including GPA.

The first chart shows the college GPA outcomes for high school students based on their high school GPA. (High school GPA is shown as a range.) For example, students with a high school GPA of 2.6-2.7 achieved an average college GPA of 2.12 during the period of the study.
The second chart shows the high school GPA level that predicts a “C” or better in gateway college courses. For example, a high school GPA of 3.0 predicts a college grade of “C” or better in MAT 151, 161, and 171, while a high school GPA of 2.6 predicts a grade of “C” or better in MAT 110, 121, 140, and 155.

| High School GPA Level Predicting C Or Better In Particular College Courses |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| MAT 101         | MAT 110         | MAT 115         | MAT 121         | MAT 140         | MAT 151         | MAT 155         | MAT 161         | MAT 171         | ENG 110-111     |
| 2.3             | 2.6             | 2.4             | 2.65            | 2.6             | 3.0             | 3.0             | 3.0             | 3.0             | 2.5             |