

Strategic Plan Assessment Action Planning Group (B-2) End-of-Year Report - May 2009

Participants

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Background

In the summer of 2008, then Chancellor Diane Woodruff asked for the establishment of a Strategic Plan Action Planning Group (APG) to be formed to respond to the Legislative Analyst's Office report, *Back to Basics: Improving College Readiness of Community College Students* (June 2008)¹. The report contained four specific recommendations:

- [The LAO] recommends the Legislature enact legislation to expand EAP (Early Assessment Program) to high school students who are considering attending a community college.
- [The LAO] recommends the development of an assessment test using California Standards Test (CST) data that would help community colleges place freshmen in appropriate courses. Community colleges would be permitted to continue using their own placement test provided that they also accept CST results.
- [The LAO] recommends the Legislature allow colleges to require underprepared students to take precollegiate coursework beginning in their first term.
- In order to better serve students' interests, [the LAO] recommends the Legislature amend the "50 Percent Law" to include counseling staff.

¹ Available at <http://www.lao.ca.gov/laoapp/PubDetails.aspx?id=1847>

In addition, the APG took an interest in the work of the California Community Colleges Assessment Association's (CCCCAA) work on development of statewide assessment tests. The APG took on as a charge these initial tasks to be completed during the 2008-09 academic year:

The work of the APG followed closely on the heels of the final report of the Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment for Placement² (January 2008), which was a response to the Board of Governor's motion on assessment³, taken in March 2007, with the following initial tasks to be completed during the 2008-09 academic year:

Discussion of LAO Recommendations

[The LAO] recommends the Legislature enact legislation to expand EAP (Early Assessment Program) to high school students who are considering attending a community college.

With the passage of Senate Bill 946, this recommendation became moot. Sonia Ortiz-Mercado of the Chancellor's Office is leading the system's efforts in working on the messaging provided to high school students who take the EAP. An important future discussion for faculty concerns the use of EAP results as a waiver for high school students into college-level mathematics and English courses at the community colleges.

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In the APG's first meeting, the CDE representative made clear that the California Standards Test (CST) was not intended to be used for placement. Due to the California Community College System's participation in the work of the American Diploma Project (ADP), research to respond to this recommendation is being conducted. At the current time, ADP is working on an analysis of the EAP, benchmarks developed by ADP, and competency statements for mathematics and academic literacy developed by the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates to identify core competencies. In addition, ADP is working with the Department of Education to gain access to the CST test items in order to do a content analysis. This will help to clarify whether or not the CST can be used for placement purposes.

[The LAO] recommends the Legislature allow colleges to require underprepared students to take precollegiate coursework beginning in their first term.

The questions raised by this recommendation were sufficiently complex that they were taken up by a subcommittee of the APG before broader discussion by the whole group. Several issues arose, which were not resolved. These were:

- How to define unpreparedness – there are significant differences in the ability of students to succeed in college depending on how unprepared they are; students who are two or more levels below college level require greater intervention than students who are one level below; in some cases, the

² Available at http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/Executive/Board/2008_agendas/january/3-5_Assessment%20TF%20Report%2001-08.pdf

³ Available at http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/Executive/Board/2007_agendas/records/03_07Minutes.doc

lack of preparation is simply the need for a refresher before assessment since high schools students can go 18 months without taking a mathematics course

- How to address unpreparedness – doing more of the same is not enough; concepts such as contextualization, supplemental instruction, and the need for counselor referral were discussed; resources and apportionment processes work against many of these concepts
- How to enforce - if students don't begin their precollegiate work immediately, what happens; many students are not motivated by basic skills instruction, and to force them into basic skills (either exclusively or concurrently with other classes) from day one may drive them away from higher education altogether.
- There was considerable resistance to the idea of preventing students who lacked college level proficiency in mathematics or English from enrolling in college-level classes in other disciplines. The reasons included concerns about the impact, not only on students, but also on enrollments at the colleges. Furthermore, if this was widely enforced, there would not be enough basic skills sections to accommodate the need.

Because of the APG's inability to find common ground on this issue, the group explored other ways to motivate students to begin their precollegiate coursework earlier rather than later. The group turned to the concept of prerequisites as a way to address this.

Currently, most classes outside mathematics and English do not have prerequisites. For example, at many colleges, a student can enroll in a transfer-level psychology class even if the student has only a seventh-grade reading ability. (This led to related discussions regarding the rigor, or lack thereof, of such classes). One barrier to establishment of prerequisites is the title 5 matriculation requirement of statistically validating that a student is highly unlikely to succeed without the prerequisite. In many situations, colleges cannot statistically prove that the student with the seventh-grade reading ability is significantly less likely to succeed in the course than a student at a college-reading level.

After considerable debate, the group arrived at consensus on changing prerequisite validation regulation to only require content review for prerequisite validation, meaning statistical validation would not be required. While some colleges are less than rigorous in doing a content review, the *Model District Policy on Pre-Requisites*⁴ clearly lays out the process for a rigorous content review process⁵.

Discussion also surfaced concerns that college-by-college implementation of prerequisites could adversely affect enrollments at single colleges because students would shop for a college that didn't require the prerequisite. There was broad consensus that English and mathematics prerequisites for courses outside of those disciplines would be workable only if implemented on a statewide basis.

⁴ Available at http://www.asccc.org/Publications/Papers/Model_prerequisites.html

⁵ Title 5 section 55201(b)(1) specifies that content review include, at a minimum, all of the following: (i) involvement of faculty with appropriate expertise; (ii) consideration of course objectives set by relevant department(s); (iii) use of a detailed course syllabus and outline of record, tests, related instructional materials, course format, type and number of examinations, and grading criteria as the basis for review; (iv) specification of the body of knowledge and/or skills which are deemed necessary at entry and/or concurrent with enrollment; (v) identification and review of the prerequisite or corequisite which develops the body of knowledge and/or measures skills identified under iv; (vi) matching of the knowledge and skills in the targeted course (identified under iv.) and those developed or measured by the prerequisite or corequisite (i.e., the course or assessment identified under v.); and (vii) maintenance of documentation that the above steps were taken.

These two concepts were widely discussed by constituent groups during the month of April 2009. When the APG met in May 2009, there was majority agreement to move forward with the regulatory change to validate prerequisites only through content review, but there were also significant concerns expressed. These concerns included:

- Impact on student access, particularly students of color, who comprise the vast majority of basic skills students; if the process for validating prerequisites becomes less onerous, will an increase in prerequisites have a disproportionate effect on specific groups of students and block their access to college courses and programs
- Research studies are all over the map - some demonstrating the value of prerequisites and some showing student success in spite of not fulfilling a prerequisite - factors which contribute to this lack of clarity include grading variability and variability in course content (some faculty have “dumbed down” content in response to the lack of preparedness on the part of students)
- Content review is not rigorously performed across the system; how to train colleges to do this well
- Statewide implementation of prerequisites needs broad discipline faculty discussion
- Statewide implementation is needed to facilitate implementation of individual colleges
- With any statewide implementation, need to start with a pilot - not wholesale implementation

In order to better serve students’ interests, [the LAO] recommends the Legislature amend the “fifty percent law” to include counseling staff.

Group discussions quickly made clear that there is a lack of clear information about district expenditures on counselors, librarians, and other “non-classroom” faculty. Without clear information, it is unclear what change should be made to the 50 Percent Law. One approach that was shared with constituent groups was to remove “non-classroom” faculty from both the denominator and the numerator in 50 Percent Law calculations, also labeled the “neutrality” approach. While there was interest in this approach from most constituent groups, counselors and librarians expressed some concern, voicing the importance of the concept of all faculty being included in one group. Ultimately, the group agreed that detailed information about district expenditures was needed to move forward with any specific proposal to change the 50 Percent Law.

Other Issues

During the course of the year, the CCCAA moved forward with its work on statewide assessment tests, beginning with the area of English as a Second Language (ESL). ESL was selected as the starting point for two primary reasons. First, skill level descriptors had already been developed through a Chancellor’s Office grant in 2000⁶. Second, of the commonly assessed subject areas, commercially available tests in ESL failed to assess the range of skills taught in typical community college ESL courses. With the support of the APG and a grant from the Chancellor’s Office, the CCCAA is finalizing test specifications, which are slated for completion during the summer 2009.

⁶ *California Pathways: The Second Language Student in Public High Schools, Colleges, and Universities*, available at <http://www.catesol.org/pathways.pdf>

Following on the recommendations from the Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment for Placement and discussions at the Technology and Telecommunications Advisory Committee (TTAC), Vice-Chancellor Patrick Perry brought a concept for the APG's consideration to develop a statewide assessment data warehousing project, which was named CCCAssess. In addition to providing centralized access to assessment data, CCCAssess would take on assessment hosting and delivery. At the current time, Vice-Chancellor Perry is in conversations with assessment test vendors and foundations for participation and support of a pilot project.

The group discussed the future of the APG. In addition to the need to follow up on the group recommendations, there was strong interest in looking more closely at the related issues of exemption policies and how multiple measures are used in the assessment process.

Recommendations

The Assessment APG makes the following recommendations:

1. Support statewide project to develop statewide pre-requisites for a limited set of general education courses using content review per the *Model District Policy on Pre-Requisites*, including an evaluation of the impacts.
2. Support ongoing system efforts to increase matriculation funding and promote a desirable counselor: student ratio.
3. Investigate what a reasonable percentage might be should counselors and librarians be included with "classroom faculty" for purposes of calculating 50 Percent Law compliance, with the possibility of using Assembly Bill 1157 as a vehicle for implementing such a change.
4. Support continued exploration of CCC Assess pilot.
5. Support continued CCCAA test-development work.
6. Support reconvening the Assessment APG in 2009-2010 to continue work on the preceding recommendations and to work on the issues of exemption policies and the use of multiple measures in student placement.