

snapshot

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DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT CRITERIA FOR MATH AND ENGLISH AT CITY COLLEGE OF SAN FRANCISCO

In a typical year, approximately 90% of San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) graduates who enroll at City College of San Francisco (CCSF) are placed into remedial English and 75% are placed into remedial math. Depending on the results of their entrance placement tests, these students may begin CCSF up to four levels below college-level math or five levels below college-level English, meaning that they must take four or five courses before being eligible to take courses that earn college credit. Data have shown that CCSF students who have to take long remedial course sequences have very low rates of completing their studies.

Improving postsecondary success for underrepresented students has been a focus of the Bridge to Success initiative, a partnership formed in 2009 between SFUSD, CCSF, the City and County of San Francisco, and key community organizations. The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University has partnered with Bridge to Success to inform the initiative's work through analyses using linked SFUSD and CCSF administrative data. With the goal of improving completion rates at CCSF by reducing remediation, the Gardner Center and Bridge to Success have used these data to identify criteria other than placement tests that would enable students to place into higher initial courses. State legislation dictates that community colleges use multiple measures for placement (5 CCR § 55521), and this initiative gives faculty and staff well-defined parameters to use.

Developing Alternative Placement Criteria

Responding to the high rates of remediation among SFUSD students who attend CCSF, members of the math and English departments at CCSF worked with Bridge to Success partners to examine data that could inform policies to reduce remediation. Previous analyses by the Gardner Center showed that many students who had high achievement in high school placed into remedial courses at CCSF. This led partners to think about reforming the placement process so that students who might be capable of higher-level work but underperformed on the placement tests at CCSF could begin their course sequence at higher levels.

We analyzed high school factors that were associated with success in CCSF courses to determine which should be used as alternative placement criteria. Several measures of high school success were highly predictive of students' passing their first math and English courses at CCSF. In math courses, students' math GPA in high school, school attendance rate, and California Standards Test (CST) math scores in 11th grade had the strongest association with passing CCSF math courses. Results were similar for English courses except that overall GPA was also highly predictive of college course

success. Using this information, the teams set cutoffs for these criteria that would include as many students as possible while not putting students at higher risk of failing courses for which they were not prepared. Based on data from past cohorts, teams decided on the GPA, attendance, and CST proficiency cutoffs shown in Exhibit 1. Applying these criteria to previous cohorts of students, approximately 30% of incoming students would have been eligible for a higher placement in either math or English. These eligible students had a 66% passing rate in their first math courses at CCSF and 79% for English, both substantially higher than the overall passing rates for the same courses.

Exhibit 1: Criteria for receiving alternative placement in math and English

Students meeting two of three criteria may place one level higher than their placement test results:	
Math	English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cumulative high school math GPA of 2.7 or higher • Cumulative high school attendance rate of 90% or higher • CST math proficiency level of Basic or above in 11th grade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cumulative high school English GPA of 2.7 or higher • Cumulative overall high school GPA of 2.5 or higher • CST English proficiency level of Proficient or above in 11th grade

Next Steps

The math alternative placement pilot was initiated in the Fall of 2012, and an English alternative placement pilot will be implemented for the first time in the Fall of 2013. These policies represent a key opportunity to improve postsecondary completion rates. However, there are important considerations in implementing the alternative placement initiative. Few students took advantage of the opportunity to bump up a level in math in year one of the pilot. CCSF and SFUSD are working to ensure successful implementation for the entering class of 2013 students through such efforts as:

- Raising awareness among students, counselors, and faculty about the alternative placement option and the importance of initial course placement;
- Improving the efficiency of data sharing between SFUSD and CCSF to enable earlier notification of eligible students while still maintaining confidentiality of student data; and
- Building counselor capacity at both CCSF and SFUSD to inform students of the alternative placement option and to provide support in the matriculation process.

Tracking the success of these alternative placement pilots for future students is also crucial. This includes understanding the characteristics of students who opt for the higher placement in math and English and examining course passing rates for students who opt into the higher placement compared to those who were eligible but did not. However, given that the ultimate goal of this initiative is to improve college completion, the results of this pilot may not be known for several years. The Gardner Center and Bridge to Success partners hope to continue their work to monitor and refine the alternative placement processes.