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ASSESSING DEVELOPMENT ASSESSMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Katherine Hughes

Community College Research Center

Judith Scott-Clayton

Community College Research Center



The Importance of Assessment

- For many (most?) entering CC students, assessment center is one of first places they will visit
- For the majority of students sitting for these exams, the result is placement into developmental education
- Yet research has not consistently found that this process actually improves student outcomes



Dev Ed: A Poorly Targeted Treatment?

- Dev Ed: a treatment often prescribed on the basis of just one symptom
- For example, a student barely fails the college-level math cutoff because s/he:
 - Never took the appropriate math courses?
 - Took them but didn't fully understand them?
 - Took them long ago but forgot them?
 - Understands the concepts but speaks English poorly?
- We need to do a better job of figuring out who can benefit from developmental ed—and developing alternative treatments for the rest



Research Questions

1. Is there consensus regarding the proper purpose and role of assessment in CCs?
2. Are the most commonly used assessments valid for their intended purpose?
3. Are there alternative models of assessment that may improve outcomes for underprepared students?



Role and Purpose of Assessment

- Essential purpose: sorting students among different levels of content and instruction
 - Other institutions sort prior to admission
 - CCs as open-access institutions must sort after students arrive
- Emerging purpose: setting consistent and transparent “college level” expectations
 - Trend towards state-level standardization of tests, cutoffs
 - Movement to align high school exit with college entry assessments
- These two purposes are sometimes in tension



Validity of Most Commonly Used Tests

- Accuplacer® (College Board) and COMPASS® (ACT) are most common
- Argument-based approach to validity:
 - “It is the interpretation of test scores required by proposed uses that are evaluated, not the test itself” (*Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*)
- Test-makers provide evidence of predictive validity, but “ultimately, it is the responsibility of the users of a test to evaluate this evidence to ensure the test is appropriate for the purpose(s) for which it is being used” (College Board, 2003, p. A-62)



The State of Validity Evidence

- Predictive validity evidence is not as strong as one might like, given the stakes (note, however, this is not uncommon in world of testing)
- Evaluations find that the assessment and placement policies currently in place do *not* consistently result in better outcomes
- Not clear that any single test could do better; but what if test scores could be systematically combined with other information?
 - Test-makers themselves caution against using a single score for placement



Alternative Models of Assessment

- Use of multiple measures
 - Additional/alternative cognitive measures
 - Non-cognitive measures (Conley 2005)
- Yet there are few studies of “multiple measures” in practice
- And what would schools do with this additional information?
 - Do CCs need an IEP model, e.g., Boylan’s T.I.D.E.S. approach?
 - Feasibility is a major constraint



Challenges to “Actionable” Assessment

- Costs and capacity constraints
- Push towards state standardization
 - How to integrate more diagnostic, individualized, multiple measures approaches into this context?
 - Standardization of assessment & cutoffs ultimately implies increased standardization of curriculum
- Early assessment as second-best solution
 - Many students simply do not realize the high-stakes nature of exams and are inadequately prepared
 - Early assessment can at least reduce this type of unnecessary “surprise” failure



Directions for Future Research

- Generate and test alternative algorithms for placement that would combine multiple measures of preparedness in a way that could be implemented consistently and at scale
- Could combine with different treatments
 - Existing developmental levels only
 - Accelerated courses
 - College-level courses plus intensive support services or performance-based payments.
- More focus on subgroup analyses in remediation analyses
- Evaluate strategies to address lack of testing information/preparation



Conclusions

- Dual purposes of assessment—as an individualized sorting mechanism, and as a means of establishing consistent and transparent standards—can be in tension
- Tests may be reasonable predictors of college-level success, but less effective at identifying who is likely to benefit from dev ed (or alternative interventions)
- Multiple measures may improve the accuracy of placements, but feasibility at scale is real concern
- We uncovered more evidence about the need for reform than about what type of reform would work best
- This is not cause for discouragement, but rather a motivator for more systematic experimentation and evaluation



MORE INFORMATION

Download event materials and learn how to participate in the online follow-up discussion:

[www.PostsecondaryResearch.org/
conference/afterevent.html](http://www.PostsecondaryResearch.org/conference/afterevent.html)

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