



High School to Community College New Efforts to Build Shared Expectations

Californians are becoming increasingly concerned about whether the majority of the state's young people have the skills and knowledge they need for adult success. In looking at strategies for improving students' prospects, the work of both high schools and community colleges is coming under greater scrutiny.

Many high school graduates are unprepared for the academic rigors of community college work

Past research indicates that many high school graduates may not fully understand the academic standards they must meet if they

take college-level courses at one of the 110 California Community Colleges (CCC). In addition, recent high school graduates who enroll in a community college vary considerably in their prior academic preparation, with many leaving high school unprepared for the rigor of college-level classes.

Unfortunately, clear statewide data summarizing the extent of this problem are not available. However, one example from City College of San Francisco (CCSF) is not atypical. Among high school graduates from San Francisco Unified School District who enrolled at CCSF in the fall of 2006 and took placement tests:

- In math, only 27% placed into a course that might transfer to CSU or UC, while 30% placed into a course below introductory algebra.
- In English, 58% placed into basic skills courses that do not count toward a community college degree.

Local variations in community college practices send mixed signals and make the problem difficult to measure

California community colleges take different approaches to organizing instruction for students who need more preparation. Based on a report submitted to the community college Board of Governors, recent high school graduates who need basic skills instruction may encounter different course-taking paths—with different implications for how

long it will take to achieve their academic goals—depending on where they enroll.

The methods California's community colleges use to advise students about academic placement also vary based on local decisions, with campuses using their own choice of placement tests plus other measures. In 2005–06, the community colleges used 92 different instruments for assessment. However, one study found that just two commercial test batteries accounted for more than half of all placement testing in the colleges.

To explore the issues of student assessment and placement further, the chancellor convened an Action Planning Group for Assessment and Placement to evaluate:

- Recommendations for developing a common placement test for the system;
- Possible changes to state regulations or statute to make immediate enrollment in needed basic skills courses mandatory for new students.

K–12 standards and tests offer potential tools for aligning expectations between the two systems

Virtually all students in grades 9–11 take the California Standards Tests (CSTs), and the academic content standards on which they are based are shared across the K–12 system. As a result, some see the CSTs as a potential resource for:

- Creating better alignment between high school and community college expectations.

This is a summary of the November 2008 EdSource report, *High School to Community College: New Efforts To Build Shared Expectations*. The report focuses on where California's K–12 and community college systems meet and explores some of the potential opportunities currently under discussion for building better bridges between them.

California's high schools and community colleges are connected by the students they have in common.

- About 30% of California's public high school graduates in 2007 enrolled immediately in a community college in the fall.
- Recent high school graduates represent a fraction of all students the community colleges serve. In fall 2007, only about 16% of students were 18 or 19 years old with a high school diploma.

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- Helping community colleges communicate their academic expectations more effectively to high school students and teachers.

Recent reports provide two visions for how high school CSTs might inform community college placement. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), in its June 2008 *Back to Basics* report, recommends the use of former CST test items to develop common math and English placement tests for the community college system.

Meanwhile, grade 11 English and math CST scores—when combined with information about junior-year grades in these subjects—could shed light on which level of community college English or math courses a student is ready to take, according to a July 2008 study by the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS).

Both visions depend on colleges connecting the CSTs with local curricula.

New legislation identifies the existing Early Assessment Program as a model on which community colleges should build

The Early Assessment Program (EAP), which debuted in 2004, uses augmented CST tests to provide high school students with early feedback about their preparedness for college-level classes at CSU campuses. Students who do well on the EAP in grade 11 are exempted from CSU placement testing in English and/or math.

Senate Bill 946, signed in September 2008, expands the EAP so community colleges can volunteer to participate. The law sends the message that community colleges have the same academic standards for transfer-level work as CSU. Students can better prepare academically in their senior year while still being assured of their eligibility to attend community college.

The EAP presents community colleges with opportunities and challenges:

- One study found that the augmented English language arts CST is well

aligned with the de facto expectations of community colleges.

- However, more than half of 11th graders were *not* sufficiently far along in math in 2008 to take either the Algebra II or Summative High School Math CSTs—the two math tests that are part of the EAP. These students are more likely to depend on a community college for access to postsecondary education.


Many efforts aim to build educators' capacity to support students as they make the transition

The goal of improving students' academic preparation raises questions not only about alignment between K–12 and the community colleges, but also about the capacity of schools and colleges. Shared expectations make a difference only if California's educational institutions and faculty are capable of meeting them. Ongoing efforts to improve the capacity of educators are taking place on a number of fronts:

- The EAP includes a professional development component for high school teachers that focuses on academic topics important for high school students' eventual success at CSU or in transfer-level courses at a community college.
- Cal-PASS brings K–12 teachers and postsecondary faculty together regionally, through Professional Learning Councils (PLCs), to develop shared expectations and use student data to identify problems and evaluate new approaches.
- The Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) is a systemwide community college effort to improve basic skills education.

The work on transitions has just begun

California policymakers and educators are working to develop new ways to support student transitions from high school to community college. But this is only the beginning of the story. Which practices and strategies

will take hold, which can be made available to more students, and what results the public should expect remain open questions. The good news for California's students is that leaders in both systems are beginning to explore solutions to a shared problem and responsibility. 

TO LEARN MORE

This is a summary of the November 2008 EdSource report, *High School to Community College: New Efforts To Build Shared Expectations*. The full report—plus additional resources related to this topic and efforts going on throughout California—is available online at: www.edsource.org/pub_transitions11-08.html

Links of interest

- The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges: www.asccc.org
- Basic Skills Initiative, California Community Colleges: www.cccbsi.org
- California Community Colleges System Office: www.cccco.edu. This website includes more information about the Board of Governors, Chancellor's Office, Management Information Systems (MIS) data system, and Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC).
- California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS): www.cal-pass.org
- California State University Early Assessment Program: www.calstate.edu/EAP/
- The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges: www.rpgroup.org. This website includes information about the Center for Student Success, through which the group conducts research and evaluation projects.