



From Policy to Practice: Tracing the Development and
Implementation of Placement and Diagnostic Assessments across
States, Systems, and Community Colleges

Phase 1 and Phase 2 Summary



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Overview

Nationwide, postsecondary policymakers and administrators are responding to emerging research on whether placement exams serve as a reliable gauge of students' readiness for credit-bearing coursework. Specifically, the widespread use of placement tests may belie their effectiveness in accurately identifying skill deficits and guiding students to the appropriate course sequence. For instance, nearly 40 percent of community college students enrolled in developmental education fail to move on to credit-bearing coursework, let alone earn a degree or credential.¹ Implications are especially pronounced for students performing near the cut score, which exaggerates the distinction between students who are ready for college, and those in need of developmental education.

Given the barrier that developmental education can present in students' timely progress to degree completion and the variation in its effectiveness, Research for Action (RFA) examined assessment and placement reform efforts across five leading states—California, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—and the implementation of those reforms across six community colleges in Florida and Virginia.

This document summarizes the findings of our two reports:

- *From Policy to Practice: Tracing the Development and Implementation of Placement and Diagnostic Assessments across States, Systems and Community Colleges – Analysis of Policy Reform in Five States* (Phase 1); and

Diagnostic assessments are designed to provide more specific information than traditional placement tests about students' knowledge of a particular topic, or capacity and skill level in non-cognitive areas. The goal is that these assessments will provide data on student strengths and weaknesses relative to key college readiness competencies and based on that data, students can access the specific supports they need to complete developmental education courses more quickly or avoid remediation altogether.

¹ Complete College America (2012).

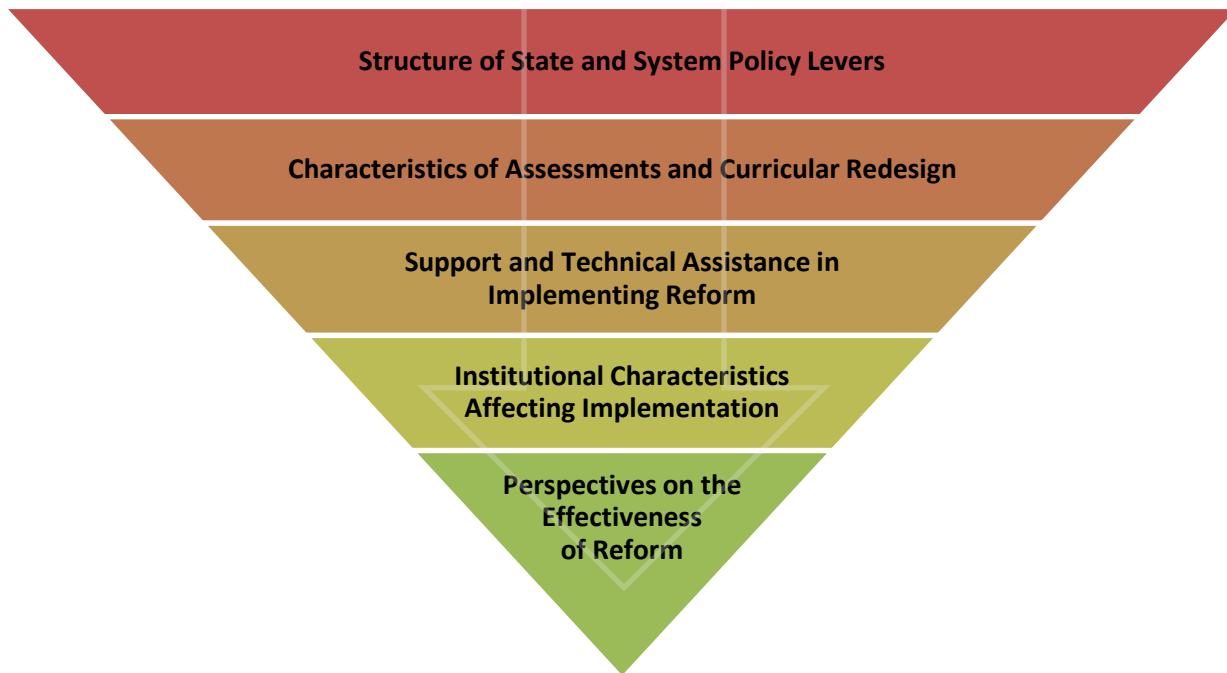
- *From Policy to Practice: Tracing the Development and Implementation of Placement and Diagnostic Assessments across States, Systems and Community Colleges – Lessons from Florida and Virginia Community Colleges (Phase 2).*

This two-part research project was conducted from September 2012 to June 2013.

Policy Factors and their Influence on the Implementation of Reforms

The state policy context influences the implementation of state-developed diagnostic assessments at multiple levels. Understanding these factors may help to inform similar design and implementation strategies as the use of diagnostic assessments and aligned curricular reforms spreads to other states and systems. Our analysis traces implementation through five levels, beginning most broadly at the state level and progressing through increasingly granular levels of implementation; each level impacts those below it and can result in responses at the institutional and faculty levels. Taken together, they provide a comprehensive picture of how state-level policy rolls out, connecting phases 1 and 2 of our research. Figure 1 provides a depiction of these levels of implementation.

Figure 1: Factors Influencing Implementation of Placement and Diagnostic Assessment Reforms



Phase 1: Five-State Examination of Diagnostic and Placement Policy Reform

September 2012 to January 2013

RFA explored how five states (California, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) reformed placement and diagnostic assessments and curricular redesign to increase developmental education completion rates. Multiple sources of data were used to develop a picture of these state and system policy reforms, including a review of state requests for proposals (RFPs), document analysis and interviews with state postsecondary leaders. The purpose of the Phase 1 study was two-fold:

- **Document efforts** by states moving quickly to reform assessment and placement policies in the hopes that states *beginning* work in these areas can benefit from lessons learned.
- **Provide important context** for understanding how broader reforms are implemented and integrated at the college level. Our close examination of state plans, coupled with interviews with postsecondary system leaders, informed the second phase of research around whether and how these reforms influence instructional practice and student impressions at institutions.

Phase 2: Implementation of Reform in Virginia and Florida Community Colleges

January to June 2013

Building on Phase 1, Phase 2 traced how policy reforms were implemented in Florida and Virginia community colleges by examining the impact of the following factors:

- State policy context and history;
- Important elements of the diagnostic and placement reforms;
- The extent of alignment between the new assessments and curricular redesign;
- Type and amount of guidance and assistance provided to the colleges during the implementation process;
- Institutional characteristics affecting implementation; and
- Faculty, administrator and student perceptions and responses to the new assessments.

The findings from this second phase of research were based on a set of cross-site comparative case studies of six community colleges in Florida and Virginia, which were selected because they were the only two of the five states studied in Phase 1 that had made significant progress implementing the diagnostic assessment reforms by the spring of 2013. Site visits were conducted during the spring 2013 semester. The colleges were selected based on:

- Current implementation of the state-developed diagnostic assessment test;
- History of developmental education reform with the Achieving the Dream initiative; and
- Variation in student size and demographics as compared to the other research sites.

Phase I Report Findings: Five-State Examination of Diagnostic and Placement Policy Reform

Our analysis identified several key factors across our study sites including those outlined in Table 1, below:

Table 1: Factors, Frameworks, and Findings in the State Reform Process

FRAMEWORKS	FINDINGS
FACTOR: Catalysts for Reform	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External to the State 	National or out-of-state influences have been central to reforms by helping postsecondary leaders: identify developmental education as an area in need of change, analyze data to make the case for new approaches, and see tangible examples of successful practice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal to the State 	Strong leadership, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement also drive change.
FACTOR: Common Developmental Education Curriculum Redesign Strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modularization 	Three of the study states – Florida, North Carolina and Virginia – broke developmental education content into discrete modules.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple Pathways 	Texas and Virginia determine the sequence of developmental education courses in math based partly on a student’s program of study.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration 	North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia have combined subjects such as reading and writing instruction in developmental English.
FACTOR: Frameworks for Reform	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College readiness standards-driven design 	Florida and Texas have made college readiness standards the driving force behind development of the diagnostic assessments.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developmental education curriculum-driven design 	In North Carolina and Virginia, the developmental education curriculum redesign has been the driving force behind the development of the new assessment systems.
FACTOR: Status and Characteristics of Assessments	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Web-based and Adaptive Assessments 	All study states have developed assessments that are web-based and include an adaptive format so that questions change for each student based on performance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessible for Students with Special Needs 	Four of the state systems required that the test be accessible to students with special needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL Version 	Only California planned for an ESL version.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory or Optional Assessment 	The tests will be mandatory in all states but Florida.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment use outside of community college placement 	Three study states use the assessments outside the community college placement process (e.g., at secondary level).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Test length 	Varies from 2.5 to 4 hours.
FACTOR: Alignment of Assessments across States	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligned with Common Core State Standards 	California, Florida and North Carolina require that the assessments be aligned with the Common Core State Standards.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligned with State-Specific Standards 	Florida and Texas require that the assessments be aligned with state-specific standards.

FRAMEWORKS	FINDINGS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligned with Developmental Education Curriculum 	North Carolina, Texas and Virginia align their assessments with the developmental education curriculum.
FACTOR: Reporting Assessment Data*	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linking Data 	Three of the states – Florida, North Carolina and Virginia - plan to will link testing data to a state or system network.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting Level 	There is wide variation across states as to the whether assessment reporting is required at the state, system, institution and student levels.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to Data 	Only Florida does not require the vendor to provide access to both institutions and the system at-large.
FACTOR: Role of Faculty*	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum Development 	All states required faculty involvement in the reform process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of Test Items 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting Performance Standards 	
FACTOR: Vendor Support*	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training 	Vendor support for assessment implementation was also required across states.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical Support 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice Tests 	

*California is not reflected in this section of the table as the state had only released a Request for Information (RFI) at the time of our research and had not determined the reporting, faculty and vendor requirements.

The following reform successes were identified by state policymakers:

- *Using data to inform the work:* State and system officials in multiple states identified developmental education student performance data as a tool in making the case for system-wide reform. Using the data to educate policymakers and other stakeholders about the need for developmental education reform is an essential first step in developing the political will to move forward.
- *Including faculty in the process:* Engaging faculty in every part of the work has been central to the successes experienced to date. Faculty members are not only experts in the content being assessed, but also in the how the curriculum is being implemented. At the same time, faculty buy-in is needed for successful implementation of both the assessment and curriculum in college classrooms.
- *Communicating across system colleges:* Both informing the field about the work that is taking place and allowing for continuous improvement through feedback from the field are important steps in the process. College administrators and faculty members need to be kept abreast of the reforms that are being planned and included in the thinking about implementation.

Reform challenges have also been a part of the policymaking process:

- *Scaling reform within a decentralized governance structure:* In states such as California where the system is decentralized and decisions are often made at the local college level, it can be a challenge

to change policy at the system level. In cases such as these, campus level buy-in and consensus building is especially important to successful reform.

- *Overcoming funding constraints:* Lack of funding can be a significant challenge in the current economic climate. Without consistent funding to move the work forward, community college systems may need to look for external funding sources and internal shifts in budget priorities to fund the development of new assessments and developmental education curriculum reforms.
- *Communicating with all relevant campus staff:* Communicating about these reforms across an entire system in effective ways can be difficult; even states that found success in this area acknowledged that it was a challenge. While faculty members were often involved in the reform efforts, student services staff are not always included in the discussions, despite the central nature of their work in developmental education and onboarding students.
- *Gaining consensus and support from faculty:* While states were largely successful in engaging faculty, they also indicated that it can be challenging to gather representatives from across the system and achieve consensus with a large number of participants. Nevertheless, this is a critical step for such reforms to succeed.
- *Alignment of Assessments across States:* While states are developing assessments with similar characteristics, they are aligned to standards and developmental education curricula that differ from state to state. Moreover, assessments are created for varied purposes. For these reasons, it is unlikely that assessments are well-aligned across states.

Phase II Report Findings: Implementation of Reform in Virginia and Florida Community Colleges

Beyond state context, a number of factors influence the implementation of state-developed diagnostic assessments at the community college level. We utilized case studies of six community colleges—3 each in the states of Florida and Virginia—to identify these factors and determine their influence.

Table 2 identifies the most significant elements of the state policy reforms, and identifies the most notable institutional and faculty/administrator responses to them.

Table 2: State Policy Decisions and Institutional Responses

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE	FACULTY/ADMINISTRATOR RESPONSE
State Policy Decision: Is the assessment reform optional or mandatory?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory adoption led to high levels of integration and scale up across the community college system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty and administrators may chafe at the rigidity of the requirements, and may create workarounds to retain autonomy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optional adoption led to more limited reform across subsets of students and community colleges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty and administrators had the flexibility to customize their approaches to adoption which led to less resistance to reforms.
State Policy Decision: How transparent is student placement and diagnostic data?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited data transparency may hinder the ability of colleges to customize student supports and developmental pacing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty preferred previous placement tests when they included more actionable student score data. Faculty implemented their own diagnostic tests in class to identify individual student needs and verify placement results.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The transparency of diagnostic data allows institutions to offer curricular support programs with multiple pathways for students to complete their developmental education courses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty created developmental education bridge courses and reported more effective placement advising when data transparency allowed for it.
State Policy Decision: Has the state developed placement test cut scores below which students cannot enroll in developmental education courses?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As is the case in Virginia, the creation of a “floor” for developmental education eligibility challenged the open-access mission of community colleges and has been met with resistance across colleges in the state. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty resist perceived de-professionalization through the reduction of their role in student placement advising. Faculty in two colleges developed “workarounds” to allow students below the cut score to receive instruction at the college.
State Policy Decision: To what degree are new tests aligned with specific developmental education curricular tools?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong alignment allows colleges to provide a clear path for student progression through developmental education based on assessment results. Lack of alignment increases barriers to ensuring a “seamless” process of using test results to place students into curricular supports that will allow them to complete the developmental education sequence quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty members prefer diagnostic assessments aligned with specific curricular tools, whether they are developed by the state or existing vendors, because they allow students to access services that address the specific areas where they need assistance.
State Policy Decision: Is the policy change accompanied by adequate implementation support?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College administrators in both Virginia and Florida reported lack of system-level guidance as a challenge to successful implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty engagement in peer-to-peer collaboration was generally seen as very valuable.

Lessons from the Field

Our examination of college-level responses to placement and diagnostic reform in Florida and Virginia clearly illustrate that successful implementation of state policy hinges upon a number of conditions and factors. Below, we provide a set of recommendations for states to consider as they move towards enacting similar reforms.

Before deciding whether to make testing and diagnostic reform mandatory or optional, carefully consider the potential upsides and pitfalls of each. The comparison of Florida’s optional adoption policy and Virginia’s mandatory policy provides a clear picture of the pros and cons of each approach. State and system policymakers need to weigh their priorities before determining which policy direction to embark upon—and develop plans for addressing its challenges.

Ensure that diagnostic and placement data is as transparent and accessible as possible. It makes little sense to enact a large-scale reform in this arena without also ensuring that the data generated from the new tests is available to those who are held responsible for serving students, faculty and other college staff.

Align assessment results with existing student data systems. Beyond placement and diagnostic purposes, integrating diagnostic data with other college level data systems can be useful for evaluation and analyses within developmental education as well as across the college.

Carefully consider the degree of autonomy that will be granted to institutions and faculty in terms of student placement and curriculum design. From a state or system policy perspective, it is more efficient to enact across-the-board decisions regarding cut scores, student placement, and common curricular tools. Yet the efficiencies gained must be carefully weighed against the barriers that can be erected when there is inadequate flexibility or input from colleges. Rigid policies can challenge the open-access mission of the community college sector, may not align with specific institution and student characteristics, and could well be met with resistance.

Invest adequate time and resources to provide the technical assistance and support needed for colleges to enact placement and diagnostic testing reforms effectively. As is the case when implementing any large-scale reform, accurate information about the reform, and assistance for colleges as they implement the policy, can go a long way towards reducing the barriers to reform implementation. Creating opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration could be a particularly effective, and relatively low-cost, form of implementation support.

Next Steps for Research

These early findings provide important feedback to a range of stakeholders and interested parties as they implement, or contemplate implementing, broad-scale assessment and placement reforms. The findings also strongly suggest that tracking policy implementation requires examining the process through multiple lenses and units of analysis, including state, institution, staff and student perspectives. Yet it is too early to know whether the initial challenges identified will be addressed and how variations in state approaches and contexts will play out over time. It is therefore essential to continue exploring this and other reforms (*i.e.*, use of Common Core State Standards consortia assessments, placement

testing and remediation at the high school level) as they emerge. As these reforms move forward, a number of factors should be tracked, such as:

- Whether and how states, systems and colleges will address the early implementation barriers identified in this report;
- Which configurations of state policy reform in this area appear most effective; and
- The results of curricular reforms on the ability of students to complete the developmental education sequence and become successful in credit-bearing classes.

A more extensive list of potential research questions are outlined in the full report. Answers to these and other questions can provide a more definitive analysis of the successes and challenges of large-scale assessment and curricular reforms at the system, institution, and student levels.