

Testing included in the Learning Support Redesign in Tennessee Community Colleges- What is  
Being done and How to Make it More Effective

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To understand the role of the testing included in the redesign of developmental education in Tennessee, it is important to understand the history of developmental education in Tennessee's Higher Education systems. In 1983 the College Board published an article entitled, "What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do". This document established a set of guidelines that outline the basic academic competencies required for college success in the subjects of reading, writing, and math, (Bader and Hardin, 2001). Based on the competencies and desired outcomes described in this paper, Tennessee passed legislation to address the problem. TBR then established the following in the Comprehensive Education Reform Act of 1984. Section 99 states:

*Within five (5) years after passage of this act it is the legislative intent that the instructional program shall be improved to provide measurable improvement in the subjects of Chapter II "The Basic Academic Competencies," Chapter III "Computer Competency: An Emerging Need," and Chapter IV "The Basic Academic Subjects," all as set out in Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do, published by the College Board, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York, 10106, 1983. (TBR, 1985, p.1)*

It was assumed that students who did not meet the minimum guidelines were underprepared for college level work. The state clearly saw the need for developmental education. Estimates taken at that time showed that at least 40% of all freshmen entering into a Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) school would need at least one developmental course. By establishing these courses, it was seen as a "second chance" for students to enter college who otherwise would not qualify to enroll in college, (Bader and Hardin, 2001). When the statistics were actually taken, over 47% of the students needed one or more remedial or developmental course. It should be noted that, "remedial" refers to the basic skills needed to graduate from high

school while, “developmental” refers to the skills at higher level than remedial that are thought to be needed in order to be successful in the post-secondary courses.

The guidelines for the Developmental Studies Program were set by a TBR committee. The guidelines were listed under “A-100” and had seven areas of concentration; these included the following: a) procedures for mandatory placement of students, (b) placement assessment procedures, (c) program design, (d) program policies and procedures, (e) administrative framework, (f) faculty and staff selection and training, and (g) program evaluation.

As part of the program guidelines, all students under the age of 21 that were seeking regular admission to TBR institutions were required to present ACT or SAT scores. Students with a composite ACT score of 15 or lower (or SAT equivalent) and students 21 years of age or older were required to take a placement assessment prior to being admitted. After taking these tests, those students who were deemed to be deficient in a basic academic competency at the remedial level were not allowed to enroll in college level courses until they had satisfactorily met the exit criteria of the remedial courses. If the students were deficient in a basic academic competency at the developmental level, they were not able to register for regular college level courses that required that specific competency as a prerequisite until they had satisfactorily met the exit criteria of the developmental courses, (Bader and Hardin, 2001).

The initial assessment test that was selected was the Academic Assessment and Placement Program (AAPP). The AAPP had three components to analyze a students’ readiness for college level coursework. Within these three components, six tests were provided. The Writing section had the students writing a 20 minute essay and was designed to measure the student’s ability to use standard written English and to organize thoughts. The reading section

had two parts which were used to determine student's reading comprehension as well as the ability to recognize relationships between words and sentences. The mathematics section consisted of three tests with students required to take two of the three. The first tested basic computation skills including whole numbers, fractions, and integers. The next section tested elementary algebra skills while the third test dealt with intermediate algebra and analyzed a student's ability to work with roots and powers, solving equations and inequalities, operations with algebraic expressions, and coordinate plane and graphs.

Along with the AAPP results, the students' educational records were taken into consideration in the placement decision. Each institution created remedial and developmental programs based on the stipulations given to them. This process allowed for each campus to take its individual needs into consideration, while keeping some system-level uniformity as each campus had to offer remedial and developmental courses in writing, reading, mathematics, and study skills. The credit earned in these courses could not count towards graduation because they were not college-level courses. Even though this was the case, the hours did count towards full-time enrollment, financial aid, and athletic eligibility, (Bader and Hardin, 2001).

A committee was established to oversee the A-100 Guidelines to ensure the program would stay timely and effective. Based on this, the program has gone through several revisions. Between 1985 and 2001, the program underwent seven changes. The eighth and current change began in 2010. The first set of changes came in 1990. The ACT and AAPP tests were both revised. To reflect this, the ACT Composite Screen Score was raised and the mandatory use of sub-scores in English and Mathematics was implemented. Also the Intermediate Algebra cut-off score for placement in college mathematics was lowered as was the cut score on the Elementary Algebra test for intermediate algebra placement. Transfer students were now required to take a

placement test if they had not completed college level courses in Math or English. In 1993 more revisions were made. Funding had been cut and the remedial developmental programs were very costly at some institutions. At this time, class sizes were increased, credit hours were changed to be uniform across campuses and cut-off scores to test into these remedial and developmental classes were again revised. In 1995, the Math cut-off scores were revised once again. The wording was also changed in order to clarify the need for testing for transfer students, (Bader and Hardin 2001).

Even with all of these changes, there was still a fair amount of confusion in regards to the program. In 1996 the guidelines changed to clarify which set of ACT or SAT scores to use in placement decisions if students presented more than one set of scores. In addition, ways for students to challenge their placement were added and TBR schools no longer accepted remedial and developmental credits from non-TBR schools. In 2000 the Compass test replaced the AAPP as the placement instrument. Also the term, “remedial” was replaced by the term “basic”. In 2001 there were several changes made to the A-100 Guidelines. Some of the most significant changes included changing the term “study skills to “Learning Strategies,” changing the phrase “Remedial and Developmental” to “Developmental Studies Program,” and creating a common rubric for all courses (Bader and Hardin, 2001).

The current guidelines were constructed based on several changes occurring in Tennessee’s Higher Education system. In 2010, the Complete College Tennessee Act took effect. One of the requirements of this act included the stipulation that college readiness benchmarks are to be assessed bi-annually and assessment scores be revised accordingly. Also all students must have ACT/SAT scores or Compass/ASSET scores, which is considered the primary diagnostic instrument. Students who test below college level will undergo a secondary

diagnostic assessment to determine appropriate learning support. It should be noted that this secondary diagnostic testing was added based on suggestions from students in the TBR system. The students wanted to limit instruction to the areas in which they were deficient, so this second test was added to determine the areas of deficiency for each student. At this time, each school determines their own instrument for secondary diagnostic testing, when to give the test, and how many hours of credit the students get for these courses if the students do not test out of the Learning Support classes. All institutions have to address the competency areas agreed upon in each subject area, but how this is done is decided by each school. Each subject is broken down into modules, but how instruction takes place in these modules is left up to each institution. Each of the thirteen community colleges were contacted and asked how their respective institutions were addressing these issues. The following is a synopsis of the basic information on how each of the community colleges in Tennessee conducts the secondary diagnostic testing:

#### Chattanooga

- Uses Pearson Products for Math and Reading; these are given the first day of class and the math is given the first day of each module
- English uses 2 tests in class. The second class students are given an essay. The second week of class students are given a PathBuilder assessment, which is a Pearson Product

#### Cleveland

- Pearson My Math Labs used for Mathematics
- Pearson My Readiness used for Reading
- Compass E-Write used for Writing
- All diagnostics tests are taken before class begins

#### Columbia

- Pearson My Math Labs used for Mathematics
- Nelson-Denny Test used for Reading
- Townsend Press Test used for Writing

All diagnostics tests given first day of class

#### Jackson

- Math diagnostic given before each module in class
- Compass is used for Reading
- Compass E-Write is used for Writing
- Math diagnostic is given in class; Reading and Writing diagnostics are given before class begins

#### Motlow

- Uses Pearson My Lab Products for Math, Reading, and Writing
- All diagnostic tests are given first day of class

#### Nashville

- Pearson My Labs used for Math
- Townsend Press used for Reading
- In-house test through Cengage is used for Writing
- Math is given before classes, Reading and Writing are given the first day of class

#### Northeast

- Pearson My Labs Product is used for Math
- Reading uses an in-house test
- Writing uses in-house essay
- Math diagnostic test is given before class; Reading and Writing tests are given first day of class

#### Pellissippi

- Math is an in-house test
- Compass is used for Reading
- Compass E-Write is used for Writing

- All diagnostic tests are given before class begins

#### Roane

- All three tests used are Pearson My Labs Products
- Students have to sign up for Learning Support classes before they can sign up for diagnostic testing

#### Southwest

- Math and Reading use Compass
- Writing is Compass E-Write
- Tests are taken before class

#### Volunteer

- Math uses an in-house test
- Reading uses Compass Diagnostic
- Writing uses Compass E-Write
- Math is taken before class begins and Reading and Writing is taken first day of class

#### Walters State

- Math uses a Pearson My labs product
- Reading uses in-house test
- Writing uses in-house test
- All tests are given before class begins

In comparing the different diagnostic tests and the various ways to administer these tests, there are some consistent issues with the testing. In general, students almost never test out of the math modules at any college. Many times, students will still have to take two semesters of Learning Support Math and sometimes Reading to complete their Learning Support requirements. The process can be problematic if the students do not finish their Learning Support requirements in one semester or change schools after they test but before classes begin,



based on differences between school procedures. Another issue is that some of the examiners feel the current order of presentation of the math competencies are difficult to navigate and might be improved by arranging the modules in a different order. Also if the test is not taken until after classes start, it can be very difficult to move students to other classes if they test out of the Learning Support classes. Lastly, there could be validity and reliability issues with all the tests.

Although there is room for improvement, there are also some positive aspects of the secondary diagnostic testing. First, the process was created due to student request. The students asked for a system to determine in which areas they need instruction in which they have already mastered, and this is what the secondary diagnostic testing provides. Next, the process gives students a chance to test out of Learning Support classes; in some institutions 25%-33% of the students have tested out of developmental reading or writing. With this redesign, the time students spend in Learning Support classes has decreased by one or two semesters. Lastly, the schools still have autonomy and ownership of their Learning Support Programs.

Based on all the observations and comments from staff at all the institutions, there are a few suggestions that might be taken into consideration to improve the system. These suggestions allow schools to keep autonomy but increase consistency throughout the system. First, the schools should develop some standard scores to compare tests between schools for transfers. Also, schools should develop policies which make it easier for students that have tested out of Learning Support to register for other classes. Another suggestion is to encourage schools to have uniform number of credit hours per subject for transfer purposes. For those schools using the same instruments, it would be helpful if they could come together and agree upon the same cut-off scores. Along the same lines, for those institutions using the same instruments, it would

be helpful to have the same type of questions on their diagnostic tests. The Learning Support Program in Tennessee is a program that has changed much over the years because the committee members are dedicated to making the program useful and fair for all students. The program will continue to evolve, but with each revision, it will improve and be in the best interest of the TBR students.

Sources:

Bader, C., & Hardin, C. (2002). *History of Developmental Studies in Tennessee*. Minnesota: The Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy.

Tennessee Board of Regents. (1985). *Remediation and developmental studies implementation of developmental studies II: A position paper*. Available: Tennessee Board of Regents, 1415 Murfreesboro Road, Nashville, TN 37217

\*A special thanks to all the representatives from all of the Tennessee community colleges that took time out of their busy schedules to discuss the diagnostic testing with me and give me insight into the process.\*