PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Briefing

Not College Material

How We Can Better Prepare California Students for College

by Matt Cox

March 2004

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INTRODUCTION: MANY STEPS IN THE SYSTEM FAIL STUDENTS

The California State University (CSU) system admits students from the top third of California's high-school graduates. Year after year, however, many of these elite students fail to show a readiness for first-year college English or math and are placed in remedial courses.

PRI's most recent *California Education Report Card* (2003) makes it clear that the bulk of this failure rests with the state's K–12 system. The CSU does take steps to bring students up to speed and works with high schools to identify students who are on track for CSU remedial courses. CSU policy, however, is ineffective and expensive, and relies on the same subjective evaluation standards that contribute to the gross lack of preparation among its first year students.

The problem is twofold. The K–12 system must improve significantly in order to prepare students adequately for college. This includes more rigorous standards, teacher accountability, test alignment, and stronger student incentives. And second, the admissions policy should be revised to better reflect student preparation and the remedial program improved to better serve students once they are accepted.

Remediation by the Numbers

Figure 1: 5 Year CSU System-Wide Remediation Rates for Math* and English

* math test redesigned after 2001

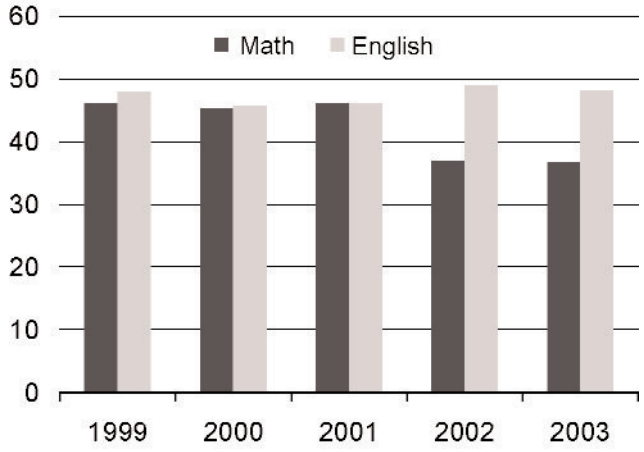

Table 1: 5-Year Remediation Table

Year	# of CSU Freshmen	# Needing Math Remediation	% Needing Math Remediation	# Needing English Remediation	% Needing English Remediation
2003	38,086	13,982	36.7%	18,375	48.2%
2002	37,870	14,016	37.0%	18,575	49.0%
2001	36,655	16,924	46.17%	16,925	46.17%
2000	33,822	15,289	45.2%	15,448	45.67%
1999	31,187	14,841	48.0%	14,500	46.0%

Determining Remedial Status

To be eligible for regular first-year math and English courses, freshmen must meet high school coursework requirements and earn a sufficient score on a standardized exam such as the SAT, ACT, or SAT II. In California the SAT is most common, and the necessary SAT score for taking baccalaureate level math or English courses is 550.

In 2002, the mean verbal SAT score for all California high school seniors was 496 and 517 for math. To take non-remedial math, for example, a student would have to have passed Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry in high school besides meeting his SAT threshold.

Students who do not meet the eligibility criteria must take the Entry Level Mathematics (ELM) placement test. The ELM is a 50-question, 90-minute exam, divided into three topic areas: Numbers and Data, Algebra, and Geometry. Sample questions will appear at the end of this paper.

Students receive a scaled score for the entire test, on a 0-80 scale, and students scoring below 50 are advised to enter a remedial program. Students with a scaled score below 42 are advised to enter into a two-semester remedial program, but these are merely CSU guidelines; individual campuses can set their own cut scores and remedial programs. However, there is little variation among campuses.

Once in a remedial class, which does not count for college credit, passing with a "C" or "C-" grade (depending on the campus) is sufficient to lose remedial status; the students do not have to take another test to be declared proficient. The fact that CSU does not pre-and post-test to determine student abilities, and the fact that a student can pass a remedial course with a less than satisfactory grade, both cast doubt on the value of CSU's remedial efforts.

Policy Prescriptions

1. Tests Must Be Aligned

CSU should use the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) as its diagnostic exam. While the CSU has taken the promising step of designing a junior-year diagnostic exam that will help students determine their college readiness (and this test does contain elements of the state standards, as well as easier material found on the ELM) the state already has a mechanism for determining whether students are learning the state education standards—the CAHSEE.

The CAHSEE must first add California's content standards up through the 12th grade, which would make it more difficult than either the ELM or the current exit exam. Increased difficulty and substitution for the ELM would have numerous benefits:

Opportunity

Starting in the sophomore year, students can take CAHSEE seven times throughout high school, unlike the current ELM which is given system-wide three times a year and then augmented by individual campus administrations. Usually, however, students would not take the ELM until the end of their junior year.

If the test did identify problems, the student would have little time to undertake remedial efforts in high school. The earlier diagnosis provided by the pre-existing CAHSEE will enable students to take more classes or supplemental services to prepare themselves for the caliber of work CSU expects.

Motivation

Tying college placement to the CAHSEE would also motivate students to continue to master the state standards even after they had passed the exam minimums currently required to graduate. The CAHSEE math, for example, tests 6th and 7th grade standards and algebra I. Most sophomores will pass, and the test is a hurdle for only the lower end of the performance spectrum.

Making CAHSEE relevant for college placement gives students incentive to work through senior year and encourages the college-bound top-tier students to continue taking the test even after they've scored high enough to graduate, giving California a better idea of how the state's students are learning the state standards through twelfth grade. Currently, the senior year is a data wasteland, but it is no less important than the years that precede it and it too should be monitored.

Balanced Emphasis with the SAT

The SAT is an invaluable admissions tool for its predictive validity but it does not indicate how well students are learning the state mandated curriculum. To the extent that public education

measures should be directed at ensuring our students master the state standards, policy should discourage them from near-obsessive cramming for the SAT and channel those energies towards the standards.

De-emphasizing the SAT for placement (leaving its role for admissions) and substituting the standards-based CAHSEE would motivate at least some students to turn SAT prep time into college prep time as it was understood 50 years ago.

Simplicity

Students, parents, administrators, and teachers alike complain of a confusing and time-consuming testing system. Teaching without testing, though, is like inhaling without exhaling. Much of the complaining is a predictable response to adding accountability into a system that has had little, but some of the criticism is valid.

Using one test for both the exit exam and for college placement would yield multiple benefits. It would indeed take some of the burden off of the aggrieved students and teachers, as the one test's results would be used for numerous purposes. The CSU junior-year diagnostic, while well intentioned, adds an exam where one isn't necessary.

Using CAHSEE would also align the expectations of the K–12 and CSU systems, providing a more seamless transition between high school and college for those students attending CSU. Besides these benefits, using a single test would be cheaper than developing, grading, and interpreting multiple tests.

2. Students Must Be Retested To Show Competency

The inexcusable flaw in the CSU remedial system is the lack of an objective competency measure for the remedial students. At the end of their remedial classes, a passing grade is sufficient to make them eligible for regular first-year classes. The ELM is solely a placement exam, but that must change.

Just as the success of a diet is not measured by attending Weight Watchers meetings, but by weight loss, so should competency be measured by a test rather than attendance. CSU students must step back on the scale at the end of their remedial classes by taking the exact same test used to determine their placement.

The top-third of California's students are the false beneficiaries of grade inflation in high school, but CSU doesn't have to continue the charade. The mean high school GPA of those students requiring math remediation in 2003 is 3.18, and they had all passed the CSU college prep math sequence. Still, 36 percent of these students were unprepared for college math. CSU should be able to connect the dots between these data.

Grades are not a reliable indicator of content mastery. Without a retest, the same subjective, social promotion schemes that flourish in K–12 can reign at college. Until students are retested, there is no reason to think that CSU grades are a better indicator of student achievement than are high-school grades. CSU's claim that more than 80 percent of its remedial students are up to snuff after one year must be viewed with skepticism.

Once a retest regimen is adopted, aggregate results from CSU tests must be publicly available so that taxpayers, parents, and students can know how each campus is succeeding in its remedial efforts.

3. Perform Remediation at the Community Colleges

Any student needing remedial instruction in both math and English should be denied admission to the CSU system. By definition, these students are unprepared for CSU and it is folly to admit them. Community colleges offer the necessary courses for about half the cost and should be utilized for this purpose. At least 5,000 of this year's CSU freshman class were remedial "double-dippers." Taxpayers subsidize each CSU student about $7,800 annually and dole out about $4,500 for community college students. By moving the least prepared CSU students to community college, taxpayers would have saved more than $16 million dollars this year.

Taxpayers spend billions on California's K–12 education every year, apparently to little effect. Asking them to pay for $7,800 remedial placements when $4,500 options abound is an insulting and irresponsible waste of tax dollars.

CONCLUSION

California provides room for every student in higher education. But this access cannot mean room for everyone everywhere. CSU *is* university; its job is not to *prepare* students for university. But it must do the best it can with the students it admits, a full half of whom are not ready for college work, and current policy is not as effective as it should be.

CSU should not remediate those students unprepared in both math and English. It is not the system's proper role and it is an expensive alternative to the community colleges. It should avail itself to pre-existing, standards-aligned competency tests and use them for placement exams. Most critically, when it does attempt to remediate students, it cannot depend on subjective classroom assessments to determine whether students are ready to tackle college work. It must retest remedial students at the end of their classes to determine competency.

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE ELM PROBLEMS WITH ANSWERS

1) **A theater has 25 rows, each with 12 seats. At a certain performance there were, on average, 3 empty seats per row. What was the attendance at the performance?**
(A) 225 (B) 264 (C) 297 (D) 300 (E) 375

2) **If b = 6 and h = 10, then ½ bh =**
(A) 8 (B) 15 (C) 16 (D) 30 (E) 60

3) **If 4x - 5 = 18 - 7x, then x =**
(A) - 13/3 (B) 13/11 (C) 2 (D) 23/11 (E) 23/3

4) **A certain medicine is prescribed in an amount proportional to a patient's body weight. If a patient weighing 70 kilograms requires 210 milligrams of this medicine, then the amount of medicine required for a patient weighing 80 kilograms is**
(A) 220 mg (B) 230 mg (C) 240 mg (D) 250 mg (E) 290 mg

5) **The inequality -3x < 5 is equivalent to**
(A) x < -15 (B) x < -5/3 (C) x > -15 (D) x > -5/3 (E) x > -3/5

6) **The sale price of Kathy's new briefcase was reduced 30% from the original price of $80. What was the sale price of the briefcase?**
(A) $30 (B) $40 (C) $50 (D) $56 (E) $104

7) **What is the slope of the line through the points (2,1) and (4,2)?**
(A) - ½ (B) - ¼ (C) ¼ (D) ½ (E) 2

8) **Maria worked in a library. She was paid at the rate of $6.00 per hour. If she worked from 10:30 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. on Tuesday, How much money did she earn?**
(A) $30.00 (B) $33.00 (C) $34.50 (D) $36.00 (E) $37.50

Answers:
1) A 2) D 3) D 4) C 5) D 6) D 7) D 8) E

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Matt Cox is a policy fellow in Education Studies at the Pacific Research Institute. He researches current education reform issues and helps coordinate legislative outreach. His recent opinion pieces on accountability and charter schools have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *National Review Online*.

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Mr. Cox has also worked as a writer for the California Senate Republican Caucus, and as a business analyst. He is a summa cum laude graduate of California State University, Sacramento.

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