

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION – TOPIC SUMMARY

Topic: Student Success: Culture of Evidence – The role of placement test on community college campuses

Date: January 29, 2010

Staff/Office: Camille Preus, Commissioner

Action Requested: ☒ Information only ☐ Policy Adoption ☐ Policy Adoption/Consent Calendar

ISSUE BEFORE THE BOARD: All 17 Oregon community colleges currently use assessments (aka placement tests) to identify appropriate placement in Math, Reading and Writing courses. At the SBE retreat on August 26, 2009, the Board requested that the Community College Commissioner work with the colleges to test the idea of using the documentation of essential skills in lieu of placement tests for Board review at the January 2010 meeting.

CCWD is not bringing a specific plan to the Board but rather a discussion about next steps. To initiate the discussion, a panel representing four colleges will discuss their experiences with placement testing.

BACKGROUND: In order to be admitted to many private and public colleges, more than 1 million high school aged students must take a college placement test. Many four-year institutions rely on the standardized tests ACT and SAT. Many colleges accept either test, and some schools accept both tests. For schools on the west and east coast, the SAT is generally accepted, while in the Midwest and central US, the ACT is accepted more readily. Students who take the ACT or SAT do so on a voluntary basis and the tests are not uniformly required of all students.

Many high school juniors are given the PSAT (preliminary SAT) test during school hours. This tests reading, math and writing skills and allows for improvement before the SAT is taken during senior year. The fee for this test is \$13, but can be waived for those students who are on waivers or discounted programs, and all students are given 2 hours and 10 minutes to complete the tests.

Many community colleges and career institutes require placement tests that are similar to the ACT and SAT, but are designed to place students in specific math, reading, and writing courses rather than assess a student's general likelihood of success in college. This is done as part of the intake process. The most commonly used placement tests are Accuplacer, Asset, ASAP (Academic Skills Assessment Program) and COMPASS/COMPASS-ESL. Regardless of the test used, all are designed to assess a student's current skill level in reading, writing and math.

Assessment and placement has always been an important issue for community colleges since students enter with varying levels of basic academic skills. More importantly, students often begin their community college education after a short, or in many cases a long, break between high school and college. During such breaks in attendance, student skill levels often change, making assessment of current skill levels even more critical.

Educators recognize that Developmental Education, Career & Technical Education (CTE), and Lower Division Collegiate (LDC) transfer students must be proficient in basic skills, both verbal and quantitative to have a fair chance of success. Additionally, there is a finite amount of time to cover course materials; slowing down the pace of the course for those who do not have appropriate skill levels is often not an option. Most educators believe that the best way to assure students are "ready" for a course and will not need catch up/ refresher time is through the use of placement tests. Placement tests get the student into the "right" classes – not too high (which increases likelihood of failure and deprives a "ready" student of a place in class) and not too low (which wastes a student's time and again deprives a "ready" student of a place in class).

Critical aspects of using placement tests include:

- A) whether mandatory or a suggested course placement;
- B) how long a placement test is good for before retesting is required; and
- C) college identified cut scores.

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