

# Rethinking College Course Placement During the Pandemic

## Three Insights from Research

Dan Cullinan

JUNE 2020

Normally, most community college students take in-person placement tests in English or math to determine whether they are required to take developmental (or remedial) courses, which are prerequisites for the college-level courses in those subjects. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced colleges to close their campuses, making in-person testing impossible. Some colleges are offering remote placement testing for students applying to enroll this summer and fall. But other colleges may not be able to surmount the technical obstacles involved in remote testing in the short term, leaving students and advisers without the test scores they would usually use to make course-placement decisions.

Even before the pandemic, many colleges were using multiple pieces of information to determine course placement, rather than a single test score. [Research](#) on these multiple measures assessment placement systems offers three important insights that might help colleges navigate their new circumstances today:

**High school grade point average (GPA) is the best predictor of student success in college courses. In fact, it is more predictive than traditional placement tests. Here are some questions to consider when using GPAs for placement.**

- *What is the right cutoff for placement?* On a four-point GPA scale, students perform roughly half a point lower on average in college than in high school. For example, a student with a 2.5 to 3.0 high school GPA is likely to pass college-level courses in math and English with a C or better. If there are concerns about specific course content, the student's high school transcript can be reviewed for grades in individual courses.
- *What if students cannot get their final high school GPAs because of the pandemic?* A student's eleventh-grade cumulative GPA is practically as predictive as the final GPA and can be used for placement decisions if the student's spring-semester grades from senior year are not available due to COVID-19 or other circumstances.
- *What about adult students who have been out of high school for years?* Research shows that high school GPA continues to predict success in college-level courses as well as or better than placement tests for up to 10 years after graduation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Craig Hayward et al., "Decay Function of the Predictive Validity of High School GPA," in preparation, as cited in John J. Hetts, "Let Icarus Fly: Multiple Measures in Assessment and

**mdrc**  
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

**ISSUE FOCUS**

**NEW YORK**  
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Floor  
New York, NY 10281  
Tel: 212 532 3200

**OAKLAND**  
475 14th Street, Suite 750  
Oakland, CA 94612  
Tel: 510 663 6372

**WASHINGTON, DC**  
1990 M Street, NW, Suite 340  
Washington, DC 20036

**LOS ANGELES**  
11965 Venice Boulevard, Suite 402  
Los Angeles, CA 90066

[www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)

- *What if high schools cannot supply records because of the pandemic?* Evidence suggests that self-reported high school GPAs tend to correspond closely with students' official high school transcripts, and are a good alternative when transcripts are not available.

**Most students benefit from being placed directly into college-level courses.**

- Students with test scores below traditional cutoffs but high school GPAs of about 2.5 or higher are **more likely to pass** college-level courses in math and English if they are placed directly into them rather than into a traditional developmental sequence.
- Many students placed into developmental courses never take the corresponding college-level courses because they lack the time or money, or because life events get in the way. Getting into the college-level courses right away, even if they have to struggle, might be their best chance at passing them.
- Alternative placement systems that have increased college-level course placement have also increased college-level course completion because students who would have been placed in developmental courses and never progressed can instead enroll directly in college-level courses. However, many of these students still do not succeed. It is therefore important to consider additional ways to continue supporting students taking college-level courses.

**Keep it simple! While complex algorithms can lead to more precise predictions about student success, colleges and students can benefit from simple placement rules based on the guidelines above.**

At a time when placement tests, standardized tests, and even high school GPAs may not be as readily available as in the past, colleges may be able to give students the best chance of succeeding by accepting whatever measures are available that indicate they are ready to take college-level courses, and allowing them to enroll in those courses right away, with additional support as needed.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Resources related to AB 205** (California's multiple measures placement law)

**Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness**

---

the Reimagination of Student Capacity" (presentation to the 2017 Complete College America Annual Convening, New Orleans, LA, November 29 – December 1, 2017).