

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## The Pitfalls of Community College Placement Tests

Pamela Burdman

May 21, 2015

Diane Ravitch, in her recent post about international math tests, raises concerns that standardized tests damage the quality of education and constrain young people's intellectual growth. What I worry about is the way they can unfairly deny opportunities to students.

In theory, some educational tests are supposed to serve as dipsticks, guiding teachers and schools in strengthening instruction in order to improve student learning. That's the argument for a new regime of exams aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

In practice, however, tests too often are used to deny students access to educational opportunities. My [new report](#) published by [Policy Analysis for California Education](#) and [LearningWorks](#) on community college remedial math placement exams underscores a troubling example.

The majority of community college students -- in California, estimates run as high as 85 percent -- are required to take remedial math courses. Typically, that is a result of students' scores on a one-hour placement test that many students aren't aware of until the day they take it.

Study after study has shown that those tests tend to under-place a significant number of students, and that high school records can more accurately predict the likelihood of success in college courses. Still, only a handful of colleges have begun using students' high school records instead of or in addition to placement test scores.

As a result, a recent analysis revealed in my report found that, in California alone, as many as 50,000 high school graduates who have succeeded in Algebra 2, considered the measure of college readiness in math, are asked to repeat that course, if not several covering K-12 material, based on their placement test scores. Some students capable of success in college-level math courses end up being assigned to as many as four remedial courses, the lowest being arithmetic.

It's bad enough that such courses delay students' progress toward a degree, but evidence shows they could even be hindering students from earning a degree at all. In fact, students who don't take remedial classes are three times as likely to succeed in college as students who take them, according to one study. Even worse, the algebra that is the focus of the remedial sequences isn't relevant to the majors most of these students are pursuing.

For such reasons, community colleges around the country have begun re-thinking their approaches to placing students in math courses, de-emphasizing test results in the process. Florida, for example, has done away with mandatory placement testing for recent high school graduates. North Carolina is introducing high school grades into the picture. California is building a system to help colleges use measures in addition to test results for placement purposes.

Ironically, though, as community colleges are growing wary of college readiness testing, K-12 systems are now embracing it. Indeed, the introduction of the Common Core State Standards relies on testing as a way to standardize expectations and improve students' preparedness. In fact, many states plan to use the tests as indicators of students' readiness for college.

Tying high school standards to the requirements of college has the benefit of ensuring the relevance of high school course work. However, education reformers should view community colleges' experience with placement tests as a cautionary tale. The jury is out on whether they can build better tests. But even if they can, the verdict is unanimous: in isolation, test scores do not justify limiting educational opportunities.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pamela-burdman/the-pitfalls-of-community-college-placement-tests\\_b\\_7344850.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pamela-burdman/the-pitfalls-of-community-college-placement-tests_b_7344850.html)