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## Community Colleges Sending Too Many Into Remedial Math

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California's 112 community colleges are designed to provide high school graduates who don't go to four-year universities a second chance at higher education. But when it comes to math proficiency requirements, too many community college students are getting a raw deal, beginning with the way colleges test incoming students' math skills and send the vast majority of students to remedial math courses.

In California, about 85 percent of students at community colleges must take remedial math courses. The typical reaction to this troubling scenario is to fault students' high school preparation. By design, community colleges are open to all comers, so it's not surprising that some students aren't proficient in math.

But placing the blame on students and high schools ignores colleges' part of the equation: The diagnostic tools most community colleges use have been found to be inaccurate, "under-placing" a large number of students in remedial courses that they don't need for college success. And according to national research, community colleges set a higher bar than even four-year universities: Community college students are about 20 percent more likely to require remedial courses than similarly qualified students at four-year schools.

Research study after research study has shown that students' high school records more accurately predict how they will do in college, but most community colleges continue to rely solely or primarily on placement tests to decide whether students can enroll in college-level math courses. These practices, in effect, levy a penalty

on community college students and undermine the vision the colleges were created to fulfill.

California led the nation in making higher education open to all by growing a system of two-year colleges, and the state's Master Plan for Higher Education became a national model.

Completion of high school Algebra 2 classes is the typical standard for college readiness in math. As college math requirements shift, there has been experimentation with alternatives that emphasize different math content, such as statistics, which is more relevant for many fields. But even measured against the existing standard, too many students are being treated unfairly.

Each year, nearly 50,000 students who have passed Algebra 2 in high school with a C or better are required to repeat the equivalent course — and sometimes several remedial math courses — when they enroll at community colleges, according to estimates prepared by the [Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges](#).

If those same students were admitted to a UC campus, they could walk into most college-level math courses without being tested. But at community colleges, they are assigned to remedial sequences. Though intended to prepare students for college-level math, the sequences have been shown to hinder more students from completing college than they help.

Fortunately, the misuse of test scores has begun to change, and California is once again in the lead, as highlighted in a new series of reports by Oakland-based [LearningWorks](#) and Stanford-based [Policy Analysis for California Education](#).

Long Beach City College is at the forefront of this work. Heeding the research evidence, LBCC pioneered a new formula that applies greater weight to students' high school course-taking. The result? LBCC quadrupled the proportion of entering students allowed to take college-level math courses. And those students did just as well in math as prior groups of students who were screened based on test scores alone.

Imagine the change if every college in California used such a formula: The proportion of students required to take remedial math courses would be markedly reduced, those assigned to remedial courses would need fewer of them, and more students would have a fair shake at earning a college degree.

The community college system is putting its weight behind this approach. First of all, next year, it will roll out a new test for all colleges to use. Even more importantly, a team of researchers with the RP Group and Cal-PASS Plus, a statewide data system, are developing a formula similar to LBCC's for use by all 112 colleges. Because our colleges are locally governed, though, use of the approach will be voluntary.

It would be a mistake for any college not to join the effort to give students credit for their high school course-taking. All California community colleges should follow Long Beach's lead and use a formula that more accurately reflects students' abilities and potential. State education agencies and high schools also need to do their part to make high school transcripts available to colleges.

There's more we can do to open up opportunities for all students in California to succeed, but this simple change will bring California one step closer to achieving its vision of true access to a college education.

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/article/Community-colleges-sending-too-many-into-remedial-6293307.php?t=80079933b5cefdcb88>