

Let Them In: Increasing Access, Completion, and Equity in College English

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Introduction

California's Student Success Scorecard shows a stark divide between "college prepared" and "unprepared" students. When incoming community college students are designated prepared for college-level work in English and math, they go on to complete degrees, certificates, and transfer-related outcomes at a rate of 70% within six years. For students designated unprepared and required to enroll in remedial courses, that figure is just 40%.ⁱ Unfortunately, most California community college students are in the "unprepared" group. Statewide, more than 70% of incoming students are required to enroll in one or more remedial courses.ⁱⁱ

But recent research suggests that students may not be as unprepared as we have believed. Two studies by the Community College Research Center have found that standardized placement tests – the primary mechanism community colleges use to assess student readiness for college-level courses – are poor predictors of students' performance in college. Analysis of data from a statewide community college system revealed that placement tests in reading/writing explain less than 2% of the variation in students' first college-level English grades.ⁱⁱⁱ A study of a large, urban community college system estimated that 40-60% of students placed into remediation could pass college English with a C or higher if allowed to enroll directly, and that 29% of them could earn a B or higher.^{iv} Long Beach City College found that when they quadrupled the number of

students classified “college ready” through changes to their placement process (from 13% to 59%), there was no effect on pass rates inside the college-level course.^v

Butte College began its own examination of placement in March of 2011, when the English department replaced a previous placement test with the COMPASS exam. Under the new test and cut scores, faculty were surprised to see that many more students were being classified as “college ready.” Instead of 23% of incoming students having access to the gateway college-level English composition course, 48% of students did. They considered lowering the cut scores back to the prior ratio of college-ready/remedial, but conscious of the high rates of attrition in remedial course sequences, they decided to let the new scores stand and see how students performed.

This article describes what happened. Overall, substantially more students completed college English across all ethnic groups, and achievement gaps between groups narrowed. Black and Hispanic students – who had fared the worst under the prior policy – saw the greatest gains, with both groups’ completion of college English more than doubling. Examining grade distributions after the new policy, we found that among students who previously would have been placed into remediation, 40% earned As and Bs in the college-level course. While there was a modest decline in average course success rates in college English, the significance of this decline is uncertain given the huge variability in success rates across sections and instructors. The article closes with a discussion of implications for Butte College and community college placement and remediation policies.

Placement as an Equity Issue

In community colleges across the U.S., students of color are disproportionately placed into non-credit-bearing remedial courses. According to 2009 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 62% of white community college students took remedial courses, compared to 71% of Black and Hispanic students and 68% of Asian students. More striking is the fact that Black and Hispanic students were twice as likely to have to take three or more remedial courses than white students were (43% of Black and Hispanic students vs. 22% of white students).^{vi} In California, more than half of Black and Hispanic community college students begin 3 or more levels away from a transferable, college-level math course. Students of color are also disproportionately represented in the lowest levels of English remediation: compared to white students, three times as many Black students begin three or more levels below college in English, and twice as many Hispanic and Asian students do (White: 8%, African American: 25%, Asian: 19%, Hispanic: 17%).^{vii}

In Figure 1, we see that Butte College follows these trends, with students of color disproportionately excluded from college-level English, both before and after the policy change. Under the more restrictive policy, 36% of white students were classified as “college ready” and given access to college English, a rate 2.4 times higher than African Americans. After the change, all students had greater access to college English, and the gap between groups has narrowed, but students of color are still disproportionately excluded from the college-level course (white students’ access is now 1.6 times higher than African Americans). At Butte, students of color are also disproportionately represented in the lowest levels of remediation. In Fall 2012, Hispanic students constituted 24% of the students who started three to four levels below college English

but only 16% of the overall student population. Asian students represented 15% of the students starting three to four levels below but only 5% of the Butte student population.^{viii}

Placement is high stakes

because for each layer of remediation required, students' completion of college-level English and math courses declines,^{ix} and students who don't complete these requirements are ineligible to earn an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year university. At Butte, only 50% of students who began one level below college in writing in Fall 2010 completed college English within two years. For students who began two levels below college in writing, that number dropped to 27%. Among students starting three to four levels below college, just 18% completed college English within *four* years (timeframe extended because of time required to progress through sequence).^x

Figure 1: Butte College Placement into College-Level English

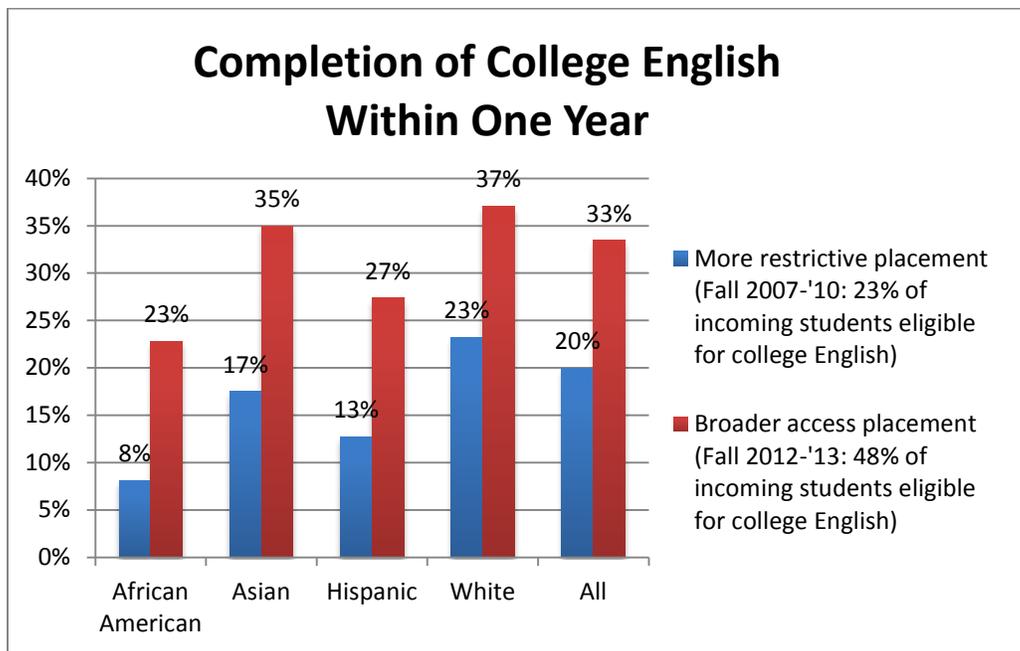
| First-Time Freshmen (FTF) Cohort enrolled for credit | Fall 2010 percent assessed at transfer level | Fall 2012 percent assessed at transfer level |
|--|--|--|
| All | 30.81% | 51.93% |
| White | 36.49% | 58.46% |
| African American | 15.11% | 37.28% |
| Hispanic | 19.17% | 41.25% |
| Asian | 18.75% | 34.88% |

Increased Completion of College English, Narrowing of Equity Gaps

The new placement policy was implemented in Spring 2011, but during the 2011-12 year, many students enrolling in English courses had been placed under the prior test. These data therefore exclude the 2011-12 year and focus on four years preceding the change and the two years after full implementation. We looked at completion of college English across the entire population of incoming students enrolled in credit courses – those placed into remediation and those placed directly into the college level. As Figure

2 makes clear, under the less restrictive policy, substantially more students completed college English within one year across all racial/ethnic groups. Black and Hispanic students – who had fared the worst under the prior policy – saw the greatest gains: Black students’ completion nearly tripled, and Hispanic students’ more than doubled. And while achievement gaps between groups persist, they have narrowed. White students’ completion of college English had been 2.9 times higher than African American students under the more restrictive policy; under the new policy it was 1.6 times higher.

Figure 2: Butte College First-Time Freshman Cohort



| Includes all first-time students enrolled in basic skills and transfer-level credit courses, except those with previous concurrent enrollment. | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| African American | Asian | Hispanic | White | All |
| 2.8 times higher in broader access | 2.0 times higher in broader access | 2.2 times higher in broader access | 1.6 times higher in broader access | 1.7 times higher in broader access |
| N= 284 ('07-'10) N= 145 ('12-'13) | N= 458 ('07-'10) N=283 ('12-'13) | N= 1092 ('07-'10) N= 746 ('12-'13) | N= 4,250 ('07-'10) N=2,014 ('12-'13) | N= 6,972 ('07-'10) N= 3,475 ('12-'13) |

We also examined two-year data for the 2012-13 group to see whether the increased completion might be driven by the one-year timeframe of the study. After all, under the more restrictive policy, more students were placed into developmental coursework, which delayed their enrollment in college English. Would they catch up if given more time? We found that, while students in both groups made gains in year two, completion of college English continued to be higher under the new policy (Fall 2012-Summer 2014: Across every ethnic group, completion was 12-13 percentage points higher than under the more restrictive policy).

An additional question we considered was whether other factors could be driving the increase in completion. The change in placement at the college level meant a reduction in the number of students placed into developmental levels. The biggest change was in the course two levels below college. In Fall 2010, 33% of incoming students had been placed two levels below; in Fall 2012, 17% were (changes in the placement test appear to have shifted many of these students up to one level below). It's possible that these students are contributing to the overall completion gains, because more of them could have progressed through college English within a year under the new policy. Another possible factor is Butte's accelerated developmental course, which enables students placed two levels below college to progress to college English in just one semester and which has substantially increased completion of college English among students at this level. In the years 2012-13 and 2013-14, Butte offered 21 sections of accelerated English, enrolling 478 students. During those years, the college also offered 243 sections of college composition, enrolling 7,007 students. While we were not able to determine the precise degree to which the accelerated course was a factor in the college-wide completion gains, the relatively small scale of these offerings leads us to

conclude that much if not most of the improvement is driven by the changes in placement policy.

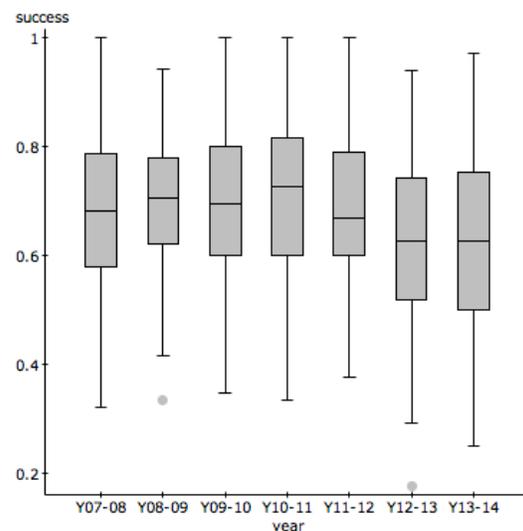
Success Rates & Grades in College English

With so many more incoming students allowed to skip remediation and enroll directly in college English, the first question most teachers will ask is this: how are they doing in the course? Are they unprepared for the rigor of the college level? Are they failing out at high rates? It's important, then, to look not only at overall completion rates (Figure 2) but at students' performance within the college course.¹

In 2012-13, the first year of full implementation, there appears to have been a modest decrease in average success rates across sections (students passing the course with a C or higher). Butte offered 119 sections of first-year composition that year, with a median success rate of 63%. The following year, the median success rate was also 63%. Prior to the policy change, the median success rates had varied from about 67% to 72% annually. So, by this measure, students do appear to be performing slightly less well in college English under the new policy.

However, it's important to note that Butte offered 83-119 sections of college English during each year of this study, and there was tremendous variability in success

Figure 3: Variability of Success Rates across Sections



¹ Online sections not included in the analysis of success rates.

rates across sections. This variability is represented in Figure 3 as a vertical line depicting success rates for all sections of the course offered within a given year. In 2012-13, for example, success rates ranged from a low of 18% to a high of 94% across sections. In the graph, for each vertical line, the data are divided into quartiles representing 25% of the sections offered, with the grey boxes depicting the middle half of the course sections — the quartiles with success rates above and below the median. (A dot represents an outlier, or atypically low success rate.) Figure 3 shows that while the range of success rates shifted down slightly after 2012, there is a great deal of overlap in the distribution. Further, prior to the new policy, the median success rates varied by as many as 5 percentage points year to year, so a decline of 4-9 percentage points in the median is not a substantial deviation, particularly when considering the difference *between* sections within any given year.

To further investigate student success rates, we analyzed data from English instructors who had taught sections of college English before and after the policy change, to determine whether their own success rates had changed (Fall 2007-Spring 2014). Of these 21 instructors, 8 had higher mean success rates after the placement change, 3 had no change in their mean success rates, and 10 had lower mean success rates. Among instructors whose success rates had increased or decreased, most saw a change of less than ten percentage points, typical of the variation teachers normally see in their classes. Most interesting: across all 21 instructors, the mean success rate dropped just 2.8 percentage points under the new policy, and the median less than 1 percentage point.

As an additional test of whether students are less prepared to succeed under the new policy, we looked at course grade distributions for students who placed into college

English from different scoring ranges on the new test. The data we analyzed include all students who qualified for college English under the new placement test and enrolled in the course, including repeat enrollers. We were particularly curious about the performance of students who would have been assigned to remediation under the old system but who were now allowed to begin directly in college English. While it was not possible to identify these students with certainty because the testing instrument had changed, we could estimate this group by considering the ratio of students placed into/out of college English under the old system. If Butte faculty had decided to revert to the previous ratios when they instituted the new test, students scoring between 73-88 would likely have been placed into remediation, while those scoring between 89 and 99 would likely have had access to college English. Figure 4 shows these two groups' grade distributions under the new placement policy.

Figure 4: Grade Distributions Under the Broader Access Policy

| Placement Score Range | A | B | C | D | F/FW | W |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Students likely to have placed into college English under the old ratios (Scores: 89-99 on new test) N=2481 | 22.69% | 26.56% | 15.03% | 5.88% | 21.36% | 8.46% |
| Students likely to have been placed into remediation under the old ratios (Scores: 73-88 on new test) N=1927 | 15.46% | 24.65% | 18.53% | 6.90% | 22.78% | 11.68% |

These data show that students testing into college English in the lower range of scores had slightly lower success rates than their higher-scoring counterparts (41% earned grades of D/F/FW/W, compared to 36% of students in the higher-scoring range). They were also less likely to earn As. However, they did not significantly underperform in comparison to the higher-scoring students. We found it noteworthy

that the lower scoring group did not receive a disproportionate number of Cs, as might have been expected if they were borderline college ready. In fact, 40% earned As and Bs in a course they would have been excluded from under prior placement ratios.

When considering rates of non-success among lower-scoring students, an important question to ask is whether they would have had better outcomes if required to first enroll in a developmental course. Among students who began one-level-below college English in Fall 2010, just 39% completed college English within a year.^{xi} This makes clear that, while we might be concerned that only 59% of the lower-scoring group succeeded in college English, requiring these students to enroll in a remedial pre-requisite does not lead to more of them successfully completing the course.

It should be acknowledged that this study has not examined direct evidence of student learning, such as performance on a departmental exam or portfolios of student work, and that grades and course success rates are only indirect evidence of student learning. That said, if large numbers of unprepared students were being allowed into college English and failing there, we would see it in these data. Taken together, the evidence on course success rates and grades suggests that doubling the number of students classified as “college ready” has resulted in little change in students’ performance inside college English. While there was a modest decline in the aggregate success rate across sections, we are reluctant to conclude that this is evidence that students are less prepared to succeed. With success rates varying so widely across sections, it’s clear that instructor-level effects – rather than simple student preparation levels – are playing a role in this outcome.

Institutional Effects at Butte College

The changes to placement have had a significant impact on enrollment patterns and personnel. Between Fall 2010 and Fall 2012, the number of first-time freshmen enrolling in college English during their first year doubled, while the number of first-time students enrolling in all other levels dropped by almost a third. These enrollment shifts have significantly altered the course schedule, and department chairs have had to scramble to adjust course offerings to meet changing student demand. Sections of college English had to be increased from 48 in Fall 2010 to 66 in Fall 2012, and 15 sections of developmental English had to be cut. Because not all of the faculty teaching developmental reading and writing at Butte are credentialed to teach college English, some part-time faculty were let go, while the English department hired five new part-time faculty in Fall of 2012 and has struggled to find and retain enough qualified part-time faculty to teach the college-level course. Two new full-time English faculty members have been hired, with a third currently in the works.

Over the last two years, the culture of the English department has also undergone some changes. 23 of the English department's 46 faculty members have been trained in methods for teaching accelerated developmental courses, with a focus on teaching integrated reading and writing, promoting a growth-oriented approach to students, and setting up course grading so that students have low-stakes opportunities to practice skills early in the semester.^{xii} These training sessions are required for faculty teaching the accelerated developmental course, but many participating faculty say that they have begun using these techniques in their college English courses as well. Department conversations about how to help college English students have also focused on many of

the practices shown to be effective for working with developmental students, particularly providing support for students' affective needs. Further, as course success rate data have been made available to the department, some faculty have begun to analyze the causes of students' non-success. Knowing that success rates vary so widely across instructors has spurred some teachers to explore how they can better support students to succeed in their own courses. In essence, many college English faculty are moving toward a vision of teaching college-level courses with developmental pedagogy and a focus on completion.

Discussion

Given the poor predictive validity of placement tests – the primary mechanism for assessing community college students' "readiness" – it is difficult to determine how many incoming students truly *are* unprepared for a college English class. At Butte, 48% of incoming students now have direct access to college-level English. In the Long Beach City College Promise Pathways program, that figure is 59%. In both cases, access to college English increased substantially without producing widespread failure in the course. But is 48% the right number? Is 59%? Could even more students benefit from having direct access to the credit-bearing, college-level course? That's a question we can't answer in this study.

What we can say is that after increasing students' access to college English, Butte College saw large, institution-wide increases in student completion of the gateway college composition course, a critical early momentum point on the path to degrees and transfer to a four-year university. The data from Butte confirm earlier studies showing that a substantial number of students assigned to remediation could, in fact, be

successful if given access to a college-level course. That this problem went undetected for so many years is consistent with researcher Judith Scott-Clayton's description of under-placement as "invisible to the naked eye": "When a student is placed into a college-level course and fails there (an over-placement error), the fact that there has been a placement mistake is painfully obvious to all." On the other hand, Scott-Clayton writes, "Among students who do well in a remedial course, it may be difficult for an instructor (or even the student herself) to know whether they were appropriately placed or might have succeeded in the college-level course as well. In any case, when a student does well in a remedial course, it is unlikely to be perceived as a problem" (35-36).

Some faculty might express concern about the modest drop in Butte's aggregate success rates and the fact that under the new placement policy, lower-scoring students – the ones likely to have been placed into remediation in the past – were 5% points more likely to earn grades of W, D, or F in college English than higher-scoring students (41% vs. 36%). But given that 40% of the students in this scoring range earned grades of A or B, it would be hard to justify excluding them from the course. And while we might be concerned about their 59% success rate, this is a substantial improvement over the number of students who complete college English after starting out in a remedial course. Going back to the more restrictive policy is clearly not in the best interests of students. Butte College might consider, however, other efforts to strengthen student outcomes, such as additional support to help students succeed at the college level, or more faculty development focused on managing a heterogeneous classroom environment and helping struggling students without compromising academic rigor.

Butte's experience also reveals that increasing student access to college-level English can be a powerful lever for reducing equity gaps among under-represented

students of color. While all students saw greater completion after the policy change, students of color saw the greatest completion gains, narrowing the gap between their completion and white students' completion. This is likely because, under standardized placement testing, students of color are much more likely to be classified as "underprepared" and denied access to college English. In short, because students of color were more disadvantaged by the previous policy, they had more to gain from the change.

The disproportionate exclusion of students of color from college-level courses remains a concern, one that deserves further interrogation in college equity planning. The issue is highlighted in the forthcoming AACU publication *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*. Researchers from USC's Center for Urban Education write, "Given the inequities in K–12 educational opportunities faced by many low-income students and students of color, it is not surprising that these students are more likely to complete high school less academically prepared for college than their white and Asian middle- and high-income counterparts." But disproportionately placing students into developmental courses "contributes to further disparities...in retention and completion rates, graduate school participation rates, and access to opportunities for deep and engaged learning throughout their postsecondary careers."

Placement and remediation policies appear, on their face, to be race neutral, with a veneer of scientific accuracy provided by the processes through which colleges validate cut scores. But students of color are being disproportionately excluded from college-level courses based on standardized tests that bear almost no relation to their ability to succeed, and this exclusion carries very real and measurable consequences for their

educational progress. The intent of our policies may not have been exclusionary – after all, developmental courses were intended to help students do better in college – but given the mounting evidence that placement into remediation leads to worse outcomes, we need to acknowledge and address the unintended consequences of our high remediation rates. The authors of *America's Unmet Promise* recognize that, given the complex roots of educational inequity, “No single reform initiative can address all of these challenges.” But they urge practitioners to confront inequities within their sphere of influence. We must, they write, “be willing to disrupt the current systems of higher education and take responsibility for those aspects of inequality that are under our control.”

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