

issue brief

September 2013

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT CRITERIA FOR ENGLISH COURSES AT CITY COLLEGE OF SAN FRANCISCO

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Recognizing the need to improve postsecondary access and success for underrepresented populations, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), City College of San Francisco (CCSF), the City and County of San Francisco, and key community organizations formed the Bridge to Success initiative in 2009. The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University has partnered with Bridge to Success to inform the initiative with data analysis. This issue brief highlights the process that Bridge to Success used in partnership with the Gardner Center to address the challenge of high rates of placement into remedial English courses at CCSF.

The CCSF English Department and the Gardner Center examined the factors associated with SFUSD graduates passing their first English course at CCSF based on an analysis linking SFUSD and CCSF student records. The CCSF English Department used this analysis to determine an alternative method for course placement from the standard English Department placement test. In other words, entering CCSF students who met specified cut scores for grade point average (GPA) and California Standards Test (CST) English proficiency in high school could qualify to be placed one level higher than specified by the CCSF English Department placement test. This brief describes the analysis and process that informed this policy change.

Background

Previous Research on College Placement and Remediation

Nationwide, many community colleges face a challenge: high numbers of entering students deemed unprepared for college are required to take non-credit bearing coursework as a prerequisite to college-level coursework. Assignment into remedial coursework can extend the number of semesters that students have to spend at a community college before becoming eligible to transfer to a four-year institution or receive a degree, potentially reducing the likelihood of completing their studies altogether. At most community colleges, entering students must take a placement test that determines the level of math and English for which they are ready when they begin taking courses. Studies have shown that more than half of entering community college students are placed into remedial courses based on these placement tests (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2009).

Although most studies cannot separate out whether placement into remedial courses indicates lack of academic preparation in high school, lack of alignment between high school curricula and college expectations, or inaccurate measurement of student preparedness based on standardized placement tests, there is some research that has identified problems with the placement test process. Qualitative research has demonstrated that students enter placement tests with little information as to the purpose or content of the tests and, therefore, may not perform up to their full ability (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Quantitative research has shown that alternative measures of student preparedness, such as high school grade point average, may be better predictors of college course success than placement tests (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). Although the California legislature has mandated using multiple measures in addition to tests for placement,¹ most California community colleges continue to rely solely on placement tests (Burdman, 2012).

The research includes some debate as to whether remedial coursework is helpful to students. A few studies have shown that students who attended community colleges with policies requiring them to take remedial courses were more likely to transfer to a four-year college compared to students with similar test scores who attended community colleges where they were not required to take remedial courses (Bettinger & Long, 2005). However, other studies have shown no positive effects related to taking remedial coursework (Calcagno & Long, 2008). Other research has shown that most students who are in remedial course sequences do not fail courses in the sequence; instead, they choose not to enroll in subsequent courses in the sequence and as a result, do not complete their studies (Bailey et al., 2009). This research suggests that the most important task may be to shorten the number of remedial courses that students must take before reaching credit-bearing courses in order to lessen the likelihood that they drop out. Although the research has not clearly established whether placement into remedial courses causes low completion rates, the research is clear that students who take more remedial coursework have low completion rates (Perry, Bahr, Rosin, & Woodward, 2010).

English Remediation for San Francisco Unified School District Students

Like most other community colleges, CCSF administers placement tests to determine entering students' initial English course level. Depending on the test results, students can begin anywhere from college-level courses to five levels below college-level courses. Partners at both CCSF and SFUSD have recognized that high rates of SFUSD graduates place into remedial courses and that this is a problem: data have shown that students who have to complete a long sequence of remedial courses are less likely to complete their education at CCSF. Data produced by CCSF and reported to SFUSD annually showed that about 90% of incoming SFUSD graduates at CCSF placed into remedial English courses. Exhibit 1 shows the English placement levels for students entering CCSF in 2011-12 from SFUSD, and these placement results have remained similar over the last several years. In addition to the high remedial course placement rates, early Gardner Center analyses showed that many students who placed into remedial courses when they entered CCSF had scored proficient or advanced on the English CST in high school (Gurantz, 2012).

¹ California law prohibits using "any single assessment instrument, method or procedure, by itself, for placement" (5 CCR § 55521).

Exhibit 1: English placement levels for SFUSD students entering City College in 2011-12 (n=818)

English Placement	Level	Number of Students	Percent
English 1A/1B	College Level	75	9%
English 96	One Level Below College	117	14%
English 93	Two Levels Below College	176	22%
English 92	Three Levels Below College	160	20%
English 91	Four Levels Below College	172	21%
English L	Five Levels Below College	118	14%

Note: The analysis only includes students who graduate from SFUSD schools in 2011 and enrolled at CCSF the next year.

Based on these data, the English Department at CCSF believed there was a need to move students through the English sequence more quickly, and instituted several reforms. First, they developed a set of accelerated courses that allow students to take intensive English courses in which students can complete two levels in one semester. Second, the English Department instituted a process by which faculty could review student work at the end of a course and nominate students to skip a level. While these changes were intended to help students move through the remedial course sequence more quickly, CCSF also recognized a need to help students begin their English studies further along in the sequence. In addition, they wanted to identify a concrete way to implement the multiple measures student placement requirement mandated by state law. There was precedent for using alternatives to placement tests. The English Department examined a pilot initiative at Long Beach City College instituted in 2012 to use high school performance to place students in English and math courses (Research and Planning Group, 2012), and the CCSF Math Department had already begun an alternative placement policy a year earlier with the help of data analysis by the Gardner Center (Williams, 2012). Therefore, the English Department undertook a process examining the possibility of alternative placement measures to reduce the length of the English remedial sequence.

Predicting Success in English Courses

Over the course of several meetings, the English faculty used data produced by the Gardner Center to select alternative placement criteria. The first step was to determine which high school factors could be reliable predictors of success at CCSF. This analysis required matching SFUSD high school achievement data to CCSF college course transcript data using the Youth Data Archive (YDA). The YDA is a Gardner Center initiative that allows partners who serve youth in common to share their data to ask and answer questions that partners could not answer independently. In this case, we linked student demographic, achievement, and attendance data from SFUSD to placement test and course taking histories for those same students who went on to CCSF. We used data for SFUSD graduates who first took classes at CCSF from the fall 2008 semester to the spring of 2012.

The data showed that approximately 61% of SFUSD graduates who entered CCSF during the time period and took at least one English course passed their first English course. As Exhibit 2 shows, the passing rates varied by the level of students' first courses, with higher passing rates for more advanced courses. The English faculty were concerned that passing rates might drop if students were placed into higher courses but were not prepared for those courses, so it was important to have these data as a baseline against which to later compare passing rates for students who will qualify for the alternative placement.

Exhibit 2: Passing rates for SFUSD students in their first CCSF English course

First English Course	Level	Pass Rate	Number of Students
English 1A	College Level	68%	333
English 96	One Level Below College	67%	777
English 93	Two Levels Below College	66%	962
English 92	Three Levels Below College	63%	604
English 91	Four Levels Below College	55%	1,258
English L	Five Levels Below College	46%	400
OVERALL		61%	4,334

We then constructed statistical models that identified those high school factors that predicted the likelihood of students passing their first English course at CCSF. The models examined the predictive strength of a variety of measures of high school success, including:

- Cumulative high school GPA
- Cumulative English GPA in high school
- Cumulative high school attendance rate
- Proficiency level on the 11th grade English CST
- Meeting the University of California English A-G eligibility requirement
- Passing an AP English course

The models included controls for student background characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, English learner status, special education status, and parent education level. Controlling for these background characteristics allowed us to isolate as much as possible which of the high school factors listed above was most associated with college English success.

Our analysis showed some high school factors that consistently predicted a student's passing his or her first CCSF English courses at any level as well as other factors that varied by level. Appendix 1 shows the regression coefficients and statistical significance for the models separately by first English course and for all courses combined. Although significant predictors of passing varied by students' first course, overall GPA in high school and English-specific GPA were significant predictors consistently across courses.

Turning Predictors of Course Success into Alternative Placement Criteria

After examining factors that predicted success in English courses, the next step was to decide how to translate these analyses into a policy for determining student placement. The CCSF English Department felt that their placement exam was a valid measure of incoming students' abilities and wanted to keep these test results as a basis for placement. They decided that the alternative criteria identified through this analysis would allow eligible students to move up to a course one level higher than their test placement.

Several key practical concerns shaped the conversations about setting criteria for students to “bump up” in the course placement. One was that the criteria needed to be easily understandable for counselors, students, and faculty to allow for clear messaging and smooth implementation. This meant that the English faculty wanted to have one set of criteria for all placement levels, even though the findings showed that different factors were more predictive at different levels. Therefore, we focused on analyses that combined all English courses instead of examining each course separately. Additionally, the team wanted to be sure that the criteria would apply to a substantial number of students to ensure that enough students might benefit from the “bump up” and that it was a large enough group to conduct an evaluation of the results of the pilot.

The English faculty started with overall high school GPA and English-specific GPA as the most important factors to include in the alternative placement criteria because of how strongly these factors were associated with passing all levels of English courses at CCSF. The faculty also felt that GPA was a logical criterion because it signified students' prior ability to complete coursework. Additionally, the faculty favored using English CST proficiency level because they felt it was important to have a normed measure of English achievement. In contrast, the faculty did not want to use high school attendance rate; attendance had a similar predictive value to CST scores, but the English team did not see attendance as an indicator of students' ability to pass an English course. Also, the faculty decided that the policy would not apply to students who default into the lowest level course (English L) because students who receive this placement may receive a wide range of scores below the cutoff for the next level (English 91). Faculty felt that these students could be at high risk for failure if bumped up to a higher placement.

Having determined to use overall high school GPA, English GPA, and CST proficiency levels as the alternative placement criteria, the team next determined cutoff scores for each that would make a student eligible for a higher placement. The challenge was to balance the cutoffs so that a substantial number of students would qualify for the bump without risking a large drop in English course passing rates at CCSF. Exhibit 3 shows the CCSF English course passing rates for students from previous cohorts at various high school GPA and CST levels and the percent of students who met those cutoff scores. As would be expected, English course passing rates were higher for students who met higher cutoff scores for overall GPA, English GPA, and CST proficiency levels, but higher cutoff scores would also translate into fewer students who would meet the cutoff scores and be eligible for a higher placement. For example, students with at least a

2.70 English GPA had a passing rate 2% higher than students with a 2.5 or higher (78% compared to 80%), but using 2.70 instead of 2.5 as a cutoff would have reduced eligibility by 8% (41% compared to 49%). Based on these data, the English Department ultimately decided to allow students to move up one level from their placement test results if they met two of the following three criteria:

- High school English GPA of 2.7 or higher
- Overall GPA of 2.5 or higher
- Proficient or advanced on the 11th grade English California Standards Test (CST)

Students who meet 2 of the 3 criteria will be notified by SFUSD of their eligibility, and those students must meet with a CCSF counselor to discuss their placement options and request their higher placement.

Exhibit 3: English course passing rates for 2009 to 2012 cohorts by GPA and achievement test levels

	CCSF Course Passing Rate	Percent of Students	Number of Students
English GPA			
2.25 or above	75%	56%	6,901
2.50 or above	78%	49%	6,031
2.70 or above	80%	41%	5,059
3.00 or above	81%	33%	4,091
3.25 or above	85%	23%	2,775
Overall high school GPA			
2.25 or above	72%	66%	8,145
2.50 or above	75%	59%	7,263
2.70 or above	78%	51%	6,323
3.00 or above	81%	41%	5,002
3.25 or above	82%	28%	3,491
CST Proficiency in 11th Grade			
Below Basic or above	69%	84%	7,430
Basic or above	72%	68%	5,988
Proficient or above	74%	41%	3,642
Advanced	77%	17%	1,533

Additional analysis revealed that if these criteria had been applied to previous cohorts, approximately 30% of students would have qualified for the bump up, and 79% of those students who would have qualified passed their first English course at CCSF. In comparison, 54% of students who would not have met the criteria for a higher English placement passed their first English course at CCSF.

Implications and Next Steps

The alternative placement policy outlined in this issue brief represents a key opportunity to improve postsecondary completion rates. As noted in the introduction, prior research supports the hypothesis that shortening remedial course sequences may increase the number of students who complete their coursework at community colleges to advance to a four-year institution or complete an Associate's degree or certificate. This new policy represents one of several efforts by CCSF and SFUSD to promote postsecondary success by reducing remedial placement rates for SFUSD graduates. With this English placement pilot and other English Department reforms such as accelerated courses, students now have a much more streamlined route to reaching college-level coursework. Specifically, most students have the possibility of reaching college-level English (English 1A) within three semesters, compared to up to six semesters prior to these changes (See Appendix 2).

Although the alternative placement process holds much promise, the way in which partners implement the initiative will be essential to its success. With the math alternative placement pilot initiated a year earlier, informing and educating students and counselors about the alternative placement option was a challenge, and few students took advantage of the opportunity to bump up a level in math. Counselor capacity was also a challenge as budget cuts meant few counselors were available over the summer when students had to meet with a counselor to receive their higher placement. SFUSD and CCSF are working to improve the efficiency of their data sharing process to ensure that students are notified earlier and that both students and counselors have information about the alternative placement options so that students who are eligible may take advantage of the opportunity.

Tracking the success of this alternative placement policy will be equally important. Information about passing rates for students from prior cohorts in lower placements cannot tell us for certain how successful similar students will be when placed in a higher-level course. Tracking progress could include examining course passing rates for students who opt to take the higher placement compared to those who were eligible but did not opt in. However, the ultimate success of the policy will be measured by improved completion rates for which we may not have results for several years. The Gardner Center and Bridge to Success intend to continue their partnership to monitor and refine the alternative placement processes.

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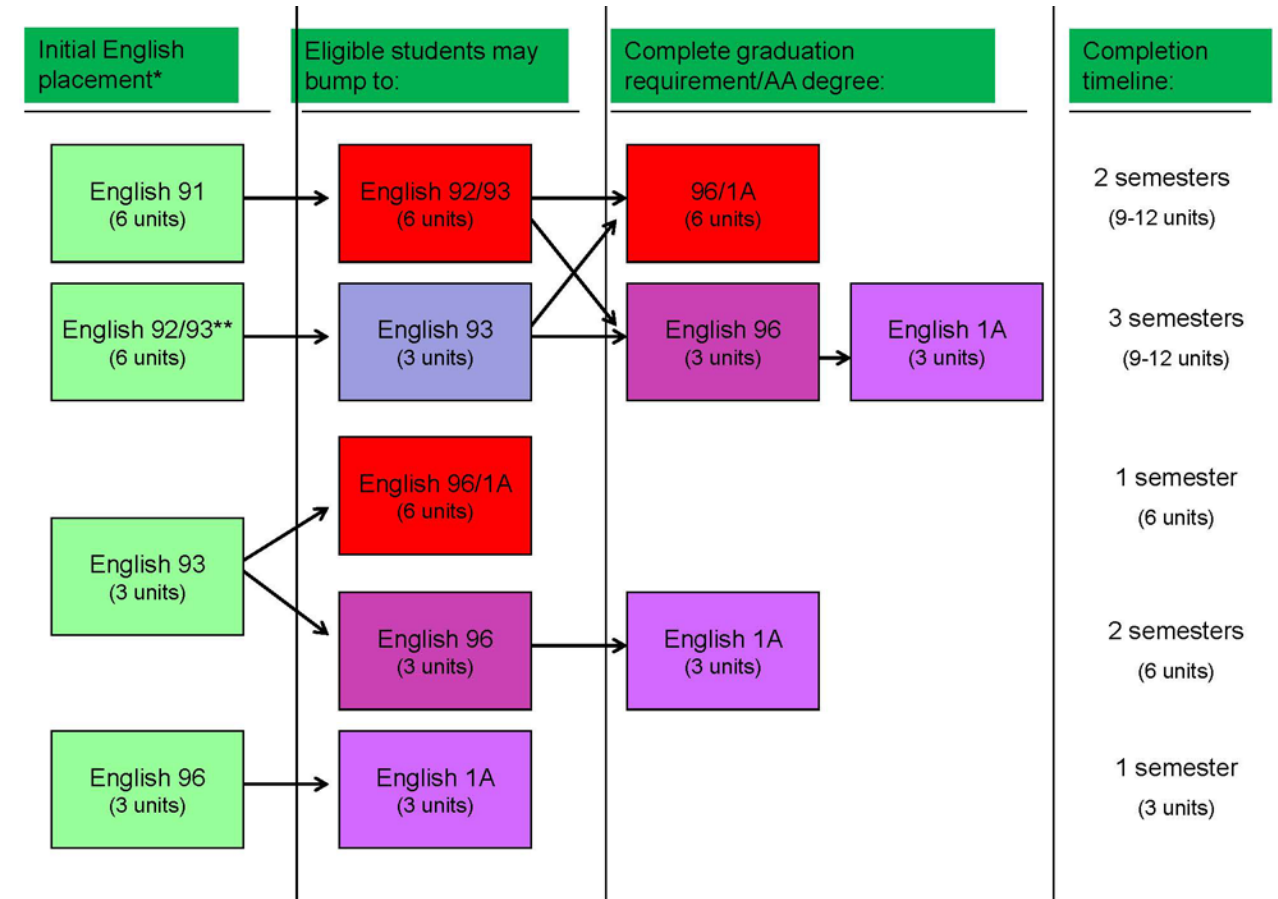
Appendix 1: Regression results for models predicting passing first CCSF English course

	All Courses	Eng 1A	Eng 96	Eng 93	Eng 92	Eng 90/91	Eng L
High School English GPA	0.049**	0.153**	0.093**	0.044	0.103**	0.08**	-0.011
High School Attendance Rate	0.002*	0.000	0.003	0.005**	0.001	0.001	-0.001
11th Grade CST Scaled Score	0.001***	-0.001	0.000	0.001**	0.001	0.002***	0.001
Overall High School GPA	0.144***	0.139**	0.087**	0.162***	0.073*	0.157***	0.125**
Met UC English Requirement	0.055**	0.236***	-0.042	-0.018	0.059	0.035	0.187*
Number of Students	4,334	333	777	962	604	1258	400

Note: This regression is a linear probability model. The significance of the results is robust to using a probit specification; however, the linear model is presented for ease of interpreting the results. Asterisks indicate two-tailed significance levels:*** = .001,**=.01,*=.05. Model also includes intercept, and controls for student's demographic attributes (gender, English language status, ethnicity, special education status, and parent education level).

CST score is measured on a scale from 150 to 600. High school attendance is measured in percentage points (0-100). English GPA is measured on a 4.0 scale. Meeting the UC English requirement is a yes/no (1/0) indicator for completing four years of eligible English courses.

Appendix 2: New CCSF English course sequence (for internal use)



*This new policy only applies to students placing in English 91 and above.

**There is no longer an English 92 placement. The new equivalent is English 92/93 placement.