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Long Beach City College tries an alternative to placement tests

The two-year college is making some placement decisions based on new students' high school grades instead of their scores on a standardized exam.

By Carla Rivera, Los Angeles Times

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Edward Yacuta felt rushed and nervous when he took a test to determine whether he was ready for college-level English classes at Long Beach City College.

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The 18-year-old did poorly on the exam, even though he was getting good grades in an Advanced Placement English class at Long Beach's Robert A. Millikan High School.

Most community colleges would assign students like Yacuta to a remedial class, but he will avoid that fate at Long Beach. The two-year school is trying out a new system this fall that will place students who graduated from the city's high schools in courses based on their grades rather than their scores on the standardized placement tests.

Long Beach is in the forefront of a movement in community colleges nationwide to reassess the use of placement tests for incoming students.

The issue is especially acute in California, where about 85% of students entering a two-year college are assigned to remedial English classes and 73% to remedial math, mostly based on placement tests. Only about one-third of those students go on to earn an associate degree or transfer to a four-year college, according to California's community college system.

Remedial classes — sometimes referred to as developmental or basic education — typically don't offer credit that counts toward graduation. Many students must take multiple levels of remedial courses to catch up. And some research indicates that remedial courses don't adequately prepare students for more advanced courses.

Nationwide, students and states spent about \$3 billion on remedial education last year, according to a report by Complete College America, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C.

"We're concerned about the additional costs of time and tuition these students may be taking on unnecessarily," said Judith Scott-Clayton, author of a recent study on remedial placement by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. "But in addition, many students may get discouraged and say 'forget it.'"

Research by Scott-Clayton and others indicates that the placement tests are a poor predictor of how students will perform in college classes and that high school grade point averages can be a better barometer.

Scott-Clayton said that the placement tests are not without value but that they should be one of several measures to determine proficiency. She acknowledged that would be more time-consuming and would pose a logistical challenge to high school counselors and college advisors, particularly those who handle large numbers of students.

Many school systems are revising their programs. Connecticut passed legislation last month to replace most remedial education at public colleges with intensive college-readiness programs and supplemental support. The Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District in San Diego County worked with local high school teachers four years ago to coordinate their English curricula and place students who earned an A or B in senior-year English directly into college-level English.

California law requires the use of multiple criteria — such as test scores, study skills, educational background and goals — to determine which classes to place students in. But the placement test is the primary tool, and transcripts and grade point averages are not widely used.

In response to the Long Beach initiative and research, the office of California's community colleges chancellor is conducting a statewide study to determine whether high school transcripts and grade point averages should be incorporated into placement decisions at the state's 112 two-year colleges.

Twenty-two colleges are participating in the study, with a report due in October. One outcome may be an online database where all colleges can access high school transcripts, said Sonia Ortiz-Mercado, dean of matriculation and early assessment in the chancellor's office.

"If students can start at a higher level, their chances of success are going to be far greater," Ortiz-Mercado said. "It would have a great impact on persistence rates and completion rates. And at a time when the colleges are financially strapped and course capacity is limited, being able to get them through quicker is important."

The Long Beach program, called Promise Pathways, could provide a model. The college, which has a long collaboration with the Long Beach Unified School District, will use high school transcripts and senior English and math grades to determine the appropriate college classes, which students must take in their first semester.

The new approach came after the college found that 60% of students it placed in remedial English classes had earned an A or B in their high school English course. Meanwhile, 35% of students placed in college-level English had received a C or D in high school. And a small number of students who failed English in high school wound up being placed in the college-level class based on the placement test.

Typically, about 170 of the 1,400 incoming freshman coming from Long Beach Unified would be placed

in college-level English this fall and about 130 in college-level math.

Under the new system, the college estimates that 800 students will be placed directly in college-level English and 450 in college-level math. Students in the program will also have to enroll in a college success course to help them with time management, note-taking and other study skills.

Officials estimate that the average student will save a semester and a half of remedial coursework. The system is expected to especially benefit black and Latino students, who are disproportionately assigned to remedial classes, said Long Beach City College President Eloy Oakley.

"We're confident in the data we've looked at and confident that students will be placed into the appropriate class," Oakley said.

Yacuta, the Millikan graduate, said he wants to major in business administration and eventually transfer to Cal State Long Beach. He's hoping that going directly into a college-level class will save time and money.

"Being accepted into the program is a real convenience for me because it's going to help me to get out sooner," he said.

carla.rivera@latimes.com

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