



## PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities  
for Youth in Poverty

*PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success* is a five-year project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and affiliated with UC/ACCORD. It consists of a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower-income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

*Inside the Basic Skills Classroom* reveals how low-income students experience developmental education, from the placement process to course completion. Their perspectives lead to important recommendations for policy and practice.

# POLICY REPORT

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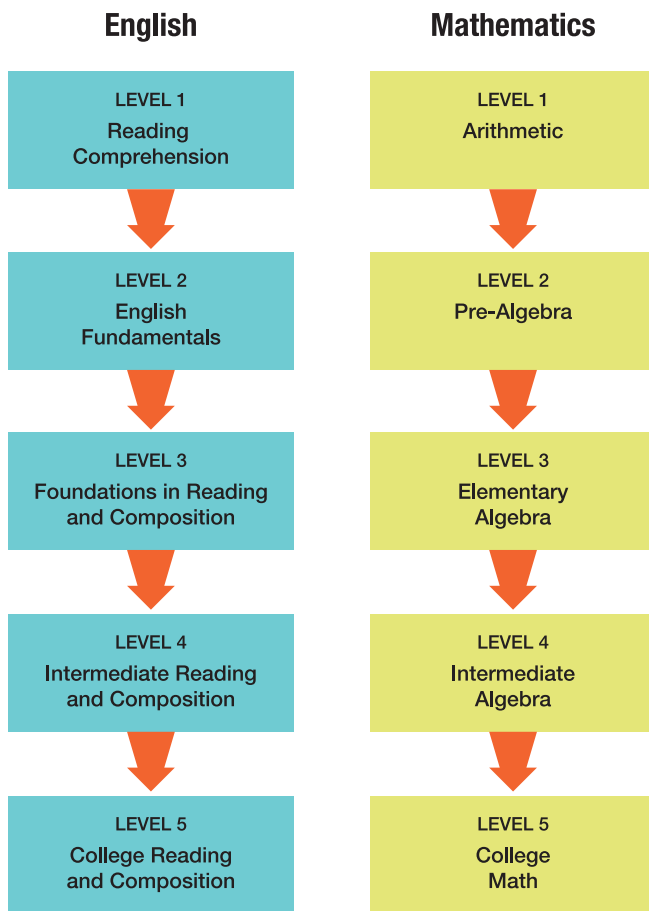
## Inside the Basic Skills Classroom: Student Experiences in Developmental Education

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The California Community Colleges (CCC) system is central to maintaining the state's commitment to higher education access. Through its certificates, degrees, workforce programs, and transfer pathways, these institutions open the doors of higher education to all, serving more students than any other postsecondary education segment. But a large number of community college students arrive on campus underprepared and require some form of remediation before they are deemed ready for more advanced courses. And unfortunately, even though these courses provide a vital foundation for many students, those who place into basic skills courses are less likely to progress to college-level coursework and earn postsecondary credentials (Bailey, 2009; Grubb, 2013; Solórzano, Acevedo-Gil, & Santos, 2013).

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2009) defines basic skills as "those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics and English as a second language, as well as learning skills and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work" (p. 4). To determine whether they possess such skills, community college students take placement exams to measure their abilities in these core subject areas. Based on the results, they may be placed into course sequences designed to build basic skills. Once placed, they must complete these sequences before they are eligible to enroll in the college-level (or transfer-level) coursework that is required for an associate's degree, transfer to a four-year university, or completion of some credential programs. Specific placement thresholds—or "cut scores"—vary by college, as do developmental course sequences (Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011). **Figure 1** presents examples of developmental course sequences in reading and mathematics.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1  
Typical Basic Skills Reading and Math Course Sequences



Note: This graphic presents one possibility of many. Course sequences vary quite a bit by campus—for example, some colleges require additional courses. In addition, ELL students must often complete an additional course sequence before they can advance to Level 1.

In this brief we explore the impact that these course sequences have on the postsecondary trajectories of California’s community college students. Specifically, we first present a system-wide portrait of basic skills education in California, and then turn to a more qualitative exploration of how these courses are actually experienced by the students who are placed into them.

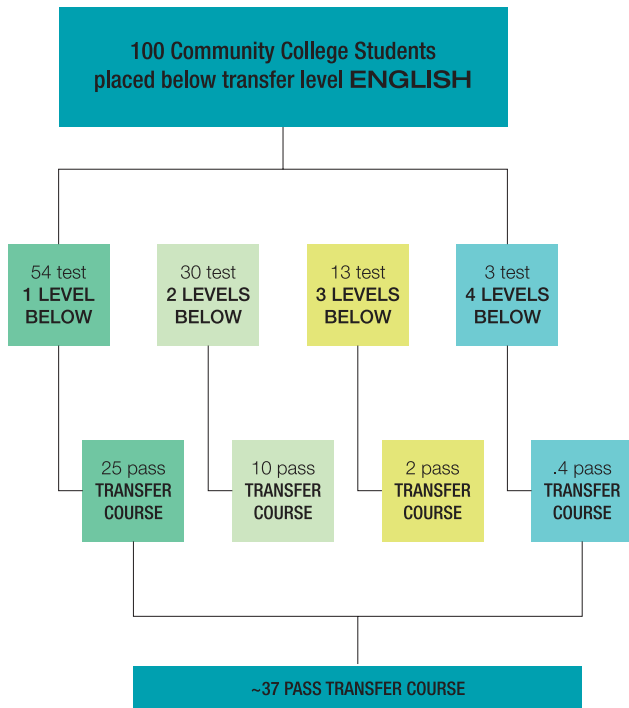
## Developmental coursework improves students’ college readiness but is also an obstacle to completion.

**Most CCC students qualify for developmental coursework.** Nationally, as few as one third of students graduate from high school prepared for college (Long, 2005). In California, an overwhelming majority of first-time college students in the CCC system are placed into developmental mathematics, English reading or writing, or English as a second language (Illowsky, 2008). Eighty-five percent of students assess below transfer-level math and 72% test below transfer-level English (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office [CCCCO], 2012).

**Remediation serves a critical purpose at the community college.** Although developmental courses are commonly described as a barrier to persistence and graduation from community college, studies that make these claims often do not control for students’ academic preparation in high school (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). They also do not make distinctions between students who place one level below transfer and those who place three or four levels below. In fact, some studies suggest that students who complete basic skills courses have better educational outcomes than those who do not (Long, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In short, students who come in with poor academic preparation and successfully pass developmental course sequences often have improved educational outcomes.

**Unfortunately, students who are placed in developmental coursework—especially at the lower levels—most often do not go on to complete transfer-level courses.** In California, only about one third of students (37 out of 100) who are placed in any developmental English course go on to enroll in and pass transfer-level English within three years, and only 18 of 100 students who are placed in any developmental math course enroll in and pass a transfer-level math course in that time frame (See **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, respectively). In fact, most students who are placed into developmental coursework advance only one level (Grubb, 2013). Thus, there is very little chance that students who assess three or four levels

*Figure 2*  
**California Developmental English (Reading) Education Pipeline**

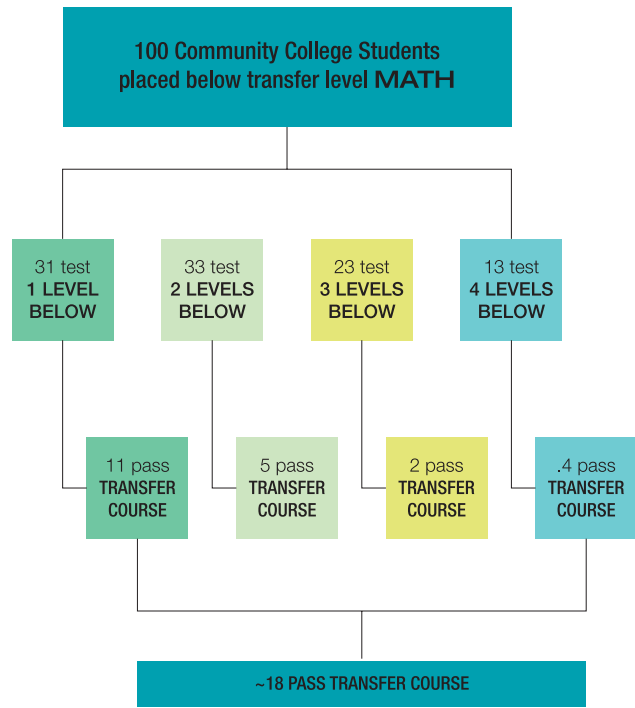


N = 101,038  
 Source: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, Basic Skills Progress Tracker Data, Fall 2009–Spring 2012

below college level will complete a developmental sequence and move on to transfer-level courses (Bailey, 2009; Grubb, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2013).

Students' ability to complete developmental coursework therefore presents a significant issue for the California Community Colleges, which is why they established the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) to provide supplemental funding to improve basic skills courses and provide related professional development for faculty and staff (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2009; CCCCCO, 2007). In this and many other efforts, however, the focus has been placed largely on broad institutional trends and on feedback from faculty and administrators. Missing from this discussion are the voices of the students themselves.

*Figure 3*  
**California Developmental Math Education Pipeline**



N = 143,700  
 Source: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, Basic Skills Progress Tracker Data, Fall 2009–Spring 2012

Therefore, in the remainder of this report, we share low-income community college students' observations about developmental education. We draw from data gathered as part of a larger case study in the Los Angeles area to describe how instructional and assessment practices in developmental English and mathematics courses can both help and impede students' success. We conclude with recommendations to improve the success rates of students enrolled in developmental education in the California Community Colleges.

## Basic skills instruction can boost students' skills and confidence.

Developmental or basic skills coursework is designed to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in college. Thus it is encouraging that many of our case study students acknowledged the benefits that the coursework provided them. Often, their positive experiences hinged on the quality of instruction. Specifically, when they respected and were respected by their instructors, they reported getting more out of their basic skills courses.

**Developmental coursework often provides an important foundation.** Roughly 43% of students reported they found developmental math and English courses useful, particularly as a way to refresh their understanding of foundational concepts. Some students even self-selected and placed themselves in lower-level coursework as a form of review. For example, Luis explained that English, and specifically writing, had always brought out a lot of self-doubt. He struggled in his basic skills English course but also acknowledged how it helped his writing and ultimately his confidence level:

*I think [my writing skills] improved a lot. [The teacher] did spend quite a bit of time on grammar [and] punctuation. It was a basic English class, and she basically just fortified what I knew or didn't forget from high school. And she just reminded me of a couple of things. So I think writing-wise it's gotten better.*

**Students respond to high expectations.** An important element in successful instruction was the presence of high expectations. José, for example, had often prioritized other courses over his basic skills courses, but because one particular instructor had such high expectations of the students, José was motivated to give his best effort:

*Mr. Perez...he just told us not to give up....And he pushed us a lot to do our best [by] being really strict about the work. It had to look a certain way. You had to have everything he was asking for. And he'll do this thing called blank test where he'll read the first paragraph and he'll straight out tell you if it's right or wrong....[And because of that] I put in more effort on my English class.*

Another student, Eduardo, had failed and repeated several developmental math courses. He described one instructor in particular who helped him successfully complete the basic skills math sequence:

### Research Methods

This brief draws on a larger qualitative case study that investigated how students understand and navigate their educational pathways within community colleges. Between November of 2010 and June of 2012 we conducted two waves of semi-structured interviews with 110 low-income students at three different community colleges in the Los Angeles area. We also interviewed faculty and program staff, conducted observations of program orientations and classes, and reviewed relevant program and college documents.

Students who participated in the research were engaged in one of three different degree or certificate pathways: basic skills/developmental education;

career and technical education; or “transfer tracks” to four-year universities. For this brief we draw from interviews with the 65 participants enrolled in basic skills courses.

Most of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and enrolled in college full time (88% and 89%, respectively). Slightly more than half (57%) were women. All but one were students of color: 68% were Latina/o, 15% were Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6% were African American, and 9% were multiracial. Most of the students (88%) aspired to transfer to four-year institutions, and 29% sought certificates. Some of these students aspired to both.

*My recent math teacher, he relates math to the world right now....I think he was the funniest [instructor] and had us paying attention. He was clear and no one had a problem. He got students motivated to actually ask questions. Some teachers don't even stop to ask if you're confused.*

**Engaged instructors have the ability to empower students.** Students at all three sites identified instructors who provided some level of support to their academic lives. Most intriguing were reports of instructors who served as a source of motivation. Participants across institutions reported that these “motivating agents” were invested in them and that they held high expectations, which seemed to make participants believe in themselves and want to achieve goals they might have otherwise thought were impossible.<sup>3</sup> One student summed it up by saying, “When people make an effort to get involved with you, you start to invest in yourself.”

**When students feel valued, they may be more likely to seek help.** Many of the participants in our study who had negative experiences in their K–12 schooling said they felt surprised that college instructors would invest time in and care for their students. Carolina, for example, described her English professor, who she said took the time to inform students about resources that would be helpful as they navigated school. Because she felt comfortable with this professor and felt that she could approach him when she needed help, her experience in his class changed Carolina’s outlook on school. Another student, Elisa, described a professor who invested time in giving students feedback, and this boosted her confidence. Elisa continued to seek this instructor’s help with essays from other classes.

Feedback from students in our case study was not entirely positive, however. They also shared frustrations about the basic skills assessment and placement process as well as about pedagogical and instructional approaches that left them feeling disengaged from their coursework. We turn now to these critiques.

## The basic skills assessment and placement process can create confusion.

A critical transition for students in community colleges occurs when they take their initial placement exams. These exams are designed to assess students’ knowledge and skills in key subject areas, and the results are utilized to determine whether students can enroll in college-level math and English or if they must first spend one, two, or more years completing basic skills coursework. Across our three Los Angeles case study sites, we heard from students that they enrolled in community college without a clear understanding of the importance of the basic skills assessment in their postsecondary trajectories. Moreover, students often questioned the results of their assessments and/or their subsequent placement into developmental education.

**Students may not initially understand the importance of assessment testing.** The majority of students described a basic understanding that the placement exam was a necessary step in their community college enrollment process, but they did not initially grasp its lasting effects on their educational trajectories. In other words, they did not perceive it as the high stakes test that it is, and instead treated it as simply another enrollment step. As such, they typically did not put significant effort into doing well. Often, the reality of how the results would affect the content and timing of their academic pathways became evident to students shortly after the exam. Liza, for example, described how she initially “didn’t think [the test] was a big deal,” but then realized its importance when it came time to select her courses:

*I saw [my results] and I’m like, “Oh, gosh.”...Because they never told me if you scored low enough you were not going to be able to take [certain] classes, so I wasn’t aware of that as I am now.*

**Students sometimes operate from incorrect information.** It was not only the colleges that were shortchanging students on information about the significance and implications of the placement exam; it appears that some students were also receiving inaccurate information at the high school level. Teresa

described the poor guidance she received from an advisor in her high school's college counseling center prior to taking the exam:

*I remember she told me... "When you take your placement tests, don't try too hard in your exam. Try to get a low score so you can get in easy classes." And I was thinking, "Oh, okay, easy classes." I wasn't aware that there's kind of a hierarchy.*

Consequently, Teresa ended up placing in low-level basic skills courses for both math and English. A counselor at the college later informed her she "had to work herself up now" to college-level courses, and it was only then that Teresa realized that placing so low meant she would have to take more classes, thus prolonging her time at the college. At the counselor's suggestion, Teresa eventually re-took the exam and placed into college-level English.

### The Assessment Process

Students generally take their placement exams after enrolling in community college but before they receive academic counseling. In some cases, however, students take the exam while they are still enrolled in high school.

Many community colleges use ACCUPLACER, a computerized assessment system developed by The College Board. With this system, the difficulty level of each exam is tailored to the student, as the computer can select more or less difficult questions based on the student's accuracy on previous questions. The tests are untimed, though each should take about an hour to complete. Students typically take both math and English placement exams in a single sitting. As a result, they are usually tested for two hours.

With computerized systems like ACCUPLACER, results are generally available immediately following the exam, and these results determine what course levels are appropriate and necessary for the student. Students may be discouraged from re-taking exams to improve their scores; some schools require a waiting period of one year or more before reassessment.

**Students can miss opportunities to prepare for placement testing.** Even when they realized that preparation for the placement exam would be helpful, students often did not know what to study or how to prepare. Mariela, for example, used YouTube videos to refresh her composition and grammar skills, but she was unaware that she also had to write an essay:

*When I went to take the placement exam, I was supposed to write an essay, so I wasn't prepared for that either. And I don't remember the question that I had to write on the essay, [but] I didn't pass.*

Similarly, David was not aware of the content or the length of the test and as a result was not mentally prepared to put in the time and effort it would have taken to do well:

*I didn't try. It takes too long. Since we have the math first and then the English, it was taking a little too long. I don't remember how many hours it took for the math one, and then I went on to English. I was just really tired. I didn't really care as much... so I didn't really pay attention to the test. So I placed at the lowest level.*

**Students are frustrated when they believe the assessment exam has not accurately measured their abilities.** Following the assessment, some students questioned their placement, whether they knew they had not adequately prepared for the exam or because they felt it was not an accurate measure of their abilities. Although it is possible that in some cases they were overestimating their own ability levels, they were nevertheless frustrated when they thought the material in the courses in which they were placed was below their academic capacity or was simply a repeat of the high school curriculum.

For many students, placement was riddled with feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and impotence. Fanny, for example, took the placement exam during her senior year of high school after a member of the admissions staff directed her to do so. Like many students, she did not understand the purpose of the exam and therefore did not prepare for it. She placed at the lowest level of basic skill math, even though she had taken college-level math in high school:

*I thought [the assessment test] was going to be just to see what kind of level in math I was, but I didn't know it was [going to] place me in a certain math class. I was kind of disappointed because in high school I got up to statistics and then here, I went back to basic algebra. And I'm thinking, "What? I already took that in high school!" So I think that kind of angered me because I'm thinking, "Why am I going to repeat that class if I passed it in high school?" And it's kind of slowing me down.*

Ana and Jaime expressed similar frustrations with feeling misplaced in basic skills courses that were not challenging enough:

*[My class] was like middle school English because the teacher, all he would talk about was the grammar and sentence fragments and all of that. And I thought, "I already did all of that." These were like one-page essays and I thought, "I already did all of this. You should push me harder." I guess I wanted a challenge. I think I should've been placed in [a higher class].*

*In my math class I felt really dumb.... There was a time where... my brother's in seventh, sixth grade. And we were taking the same class. So I kind of felt like, "Really? He's eight years younger than me. And we're taking the same class."*

Again, it is possible that in some cases students were simply not aware of their own ability levels. Nevertheless, their frustration with being placed in coursework that they believed was not appropriate undoubtedly took a toll on their motivation and determination.

## Basic skills instructional approaches can derail students.

Not surprisingly, given their critiques of the placement process, students in the Los Angeles case study also described frustrations with the basic skills courses they were taking. As described above, some of this frustration came from the course content, which students often felt was too easy. Just as often, however,

students faced teaching practices that did not engage them or lead to deeper understanding of the course material.

**Students are frustrated by poor instructional practices.** Students across the three research sites complained about the curricular and pedagogical practices of their teachers—particularly in math—claiming that their classes were boring, hard to understand, or both. They often found the instructional approaches used in basic skills classrooms to be disengaging and ineffective. Gustavo, for example, explained that his math instructor was the “worst teacher in [his] whole life, by far.” He noted that the course started with 45 students and ended with five. According to Gustavo, the instructor did not thoroughly explain the material and did not help students when they needed more direction. Moreover, the teacher gave tests on topics different from those she covered in class. Another student, Edward, had a similar experience:

*I'd probably have to say that some of the math teachers are just—they're really boring. My first math teacher... I couldn't understand anything. He couldn't control the class at all. Another math teacher, it was just a really boring class, and I didn't like the way he would teach because he would ask a question, and the way he would explain it, he would confuse you.*

Octavio described a similar frustration:

*In math, you just kind of sit there and listen. They don't even know who I am. They don't know who I am at all. I'm in the back. They just—their assistant takes roll. They never interact with us. They don't ever walk around. They don't do anything.... A lot of math classes have just been “[sit] there, take notes, do the homework, come to class and take the test.”*

**When instructors approach course material from an assumption of deficiency, students have difficulty engaging with it.**<sup>4</sup> Students in our case study described instructors' comments about how many students would not complete or pass their courses by the end of the semester. Moreover, they felt that

teachers were quick to blame them when they were confused or had questions, rather than accommodate their varied needs. In fact, the majority of students in developmental math courses reported that professors lacked the patience necessary to provide help and clarification. Daphne, for example, described her math class and said she “didn’t connect with the instructor at all.” She said that when students told their instructor they were confused and wanted to go over material again, she would become frustrated with them:

*She would skip multiple steps to get to the answers. And then she [would say], “Well, these are shortcuts. You guys are supposed to know these shortcuts already.” Some of us, we need it more than one time or you need to show us different ways, not the same way it’s going to be for everybody.... You know, we all learn differently. She really needs to reevaluate the way she teaches.*

Daphne said this same instructor informed the class that, “she asked her chair if she could fail an entire class. And her chair said, ‘Yeah.’” Daphne understandably wondered, “Wouldn’t that raise a flag to you as an instructor? If I’m going to fail an entire class, something is wrong.” Other participants relayed similar experiences, most often with math instructors, and when they asked for help or clearer instructions they were often met with responses like “You should already know that,” or “I’m not taking time to repeat this.”

**Students’ help-seeking behavior is affected by faculty temperament and behavior.** Beyond their openness to questions in class, some students said their instructors were simply not approachable, and this kept them from asking questions when material was unclear. Min, for example, felt there was a “wall between students and professor.” Another student pointed to her past schooling experiences as a deterrent to her seeking help. She explained, “I’ve had bad experiences with teachers...I feel like they’re going to scream at me.”

Some students actively avoided seeking help from their instructors and looked for other solutions instead. When asked why she would rather go to tutoring than to her professor when she needed help,

Natalie said that her professor was, “unapproachable, she kind of makes fun of you, dumbs you down, makes you feel dumb.” Likewise, Jessica reflected on how she avoided a professor because he was “not a nice man”:

*He would make it clear to you that he wasn’t the type of person that you want to go ask questions. Usually the first day of school professors say, “Come meet me at office hours if you need help.”... And every time he was trying to teach, a lot of students would ask questions. And he would really get irritated. So if you went to his office you could only imagine how much more irritated he was going to get.*

Daphne also found her instructor to be less helpful than other sources. She explained, “When I would do my homework, I would actually understand it more from the book itself than from the instructor.”

### Who Is Teaching Basic Skills Courses?

Adjunct instructors are often the first teachers that a basic skills community college student meets; they represent the majority of faculty who will teach their basic skills courses (Board of Governors, 2008). In general, 55% of instructors in the CCC are full-time tenure-track faculty and 45% are part-time (ASCCC, 2008). Out of the approximate 58,000 faculty in the CCC who teach basic skills courses, over half of them are adjunct faculty.

Adjunct instructors face many unique challenges in their work, ones that full-time faculty do not. Many adjunct faculty earn the nickname “freeway flyers” (Illowsky, 2008) because of how they move from campus to campus trying to earn a living. This lifestyle means they are rarely able to attend professional development activities or receive mentoring in pedagogical techniques. They may have little or no connection to curriculum development or student learning outcomes and likely receive little or no training on the availability of student services such as tutoring, mentoring, or financial aid.



## Summary and Recommendations

In this brief we have shed light on two key aspects of students' experiences with developmental education: placement testing and instruction. From our conversations with students enrolled in basic skills coursework at three Los Angeles area community colleges, we learned what students believe is and is not working. Specifically, some students were thankful for the opportunity to build and strengthen important academic skills. And faculty who were truly engaged in the classroom—who believed in and supported students—had the ability to boost students' confidence and abilities. Indeed, students appeared more likely to thrive when they felt encouraged and respected.

But these experiences seemed to be the exception rather than the norm, and too many of our case study students reported that developmental education threatened to derail them from their educational trajectories. Specifically, they did not feel they were given sufficient information about how to approach the assessment exams, and many believed this led to incorrect placements and unnecessarily delayed post-secondary trajectories. Once enrolled in basic skills courses, students were often frustrated by material they felt repeated high school work and by instructors they perceived as disengaged and unapproachable.

Other research has revealed flaws in the procedures colleges use to place students in developmental courses (Bailey, 2009; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). It is clear from our findings that students often do not have sufficient information to prepare for placement exams, and their options are limited when they believe they have been misplaced. For example, students are not given the opportunity to “test out” of courses once they enroll, and some institutions require a lengthy waiting period before assessment exams can be retaken. These problems are only exacerbated by limited course offerings resulting from shrinking community college budgets. In short, students who place into developmental courses feel—and in many cases are—stuck.

Likewise, other studies have shown that in developmental courses, instructors may employ disengaging curriculum and instruction if they have low expectations of their students, if they believe that a drill-orientated approach to teaching “remediation” is appropriate, and if they have not had formal training in instructional methods (Grubb, 2013; Rose, 2010, 2011). Adjunct instructors teach the majority of basic skills courses and, unfortunately, they often have no time for preparation, let alone reflection around instruction (Rose, 2011; Wallin, 2005). As our students' reflections make clear, the quality of instruction in developmental courses is crucial. Addressing the basic skills “crisis” in the California Community Colleges necessitates a discussion that critically assesses and addresses effective teaching.

With these findings in mind, we offer the following recommendations for institutions committed to improving basic skills placement and instruction:

- **Students should learn about the importance and content of placement exams as early as possible, and be provided with opportunities to prepare for them.** In order to arm students with adequate information and to inform them of the importance of assessment testing, all colleges should clearly explain these issues during mandatory orientation sessions. Colleges should also provide clear course sequence maps that explain what these sequences mean in relation to time to completion or degree. Beyond simply informing students of the need to prepare, colleges should provide resources and opportunities that allow them to do so. Some institutions post online sample tests and one of the colleges we observed offered short refresher courses that students could complete before their placement exams. Students are not always aware that these resources exist, however. Therefore, this practice should become more widespread and be better publicized. Such opportunities can better prepare students so that placement exams truly reflect their abilities.

- **Institutions should use assessment and placement procedures that accurately measure what students know.** Many students in our case study were frustrated by basic skills coursework, in part because they often felt that had been misplaced. Indeed, a recent study by Melguizo et al. (2013) showed substantial variation in how students are assessed for developmental education in California. Their results raise questions about whether colleges are effectively placing students, especially those whose scores fall at the “cut point” between two levels of the developmental math sequence. Institutions must clarify confusing placement systems that can leave students feeling like they are enrolled in the wrong courses. Better communication across districts and campuses can lead to a more centralized system that will allow colleges to validate the scores that are used to sort students (Melguizo et al., 2013).
- **Students must always have access to coursework that they find challenging and relevant.** To this end, institutions should implement procedures that allow students to more readily demonstrate mastery of course material. A student who believes his or her placement scores are inaccurate should be allowed to re-take the exam much earlier than the one-year waiting period that is commonly allowed. Likewise, a student who is already enrolled in a developmental course sequence should be given the opportunity to “test out,” rather than being required to complete the full sequence before moving on. Several institutions are currently piloting or have implemented accelerated courses to help students move faster through basic skills sequences. While many colleges have done this successfully, we caution that these efforts cannot be implemented without careful consideration of the quality of instruction that is brought into the classroom.
- **High school and community college districts must work together to better prepare their students.** As Attewell et al.’s (2006) study suggests, inadequate high school preparation significantly disadvantages students who need remediation. Strategies to improve basic skills instruction need to include better coordination between secondary

and postsecondary institutions. This includes state and district conversations and strategies on how to strengthen articulation as students transition from high school to college.

- **All faculty, especially adjunct instructors, must be given opportunities and compensation to improve curriculum and pedagogy.** Adjunct instructors are given the bulk of the developmental course load, yet they typically have the least amount of time to improve their instruction. Basic skills instructional staff should be able to continuously work to improve their craft, reflect on their teaching, and share innovative and creative curricular and pedagogical skills, texts, and resources. In particular, they must be equipped to move beyond what Grubb (2013) calls “remedial instruction.” Likewise, the demeanor of basic skills instructors is an important aspect of the classroom environment, especially for students who have historically struggled in their educational trajectories, such as those in developmental education courses. These efforts will help to improve the quality of instruction and demonstrate the importance of basic skills coursework to overall institutional goals.
- **Basic skills instruction must build on students’ assets and strengths.** Pedagogy in basic skills classrooms is often not engaging, in part because instructors and institutions too often carry deficit-based assumptions about students’ capacities (Grubb, 2013; Grubb & Cox, 2005; Rose, 2011). Faculty who teach these sequences should come to the courses with an understanding that their students are capable of matriculating from developmental course sequences to college-level work. This understanding must be supported by an institutional culture that provides the necessary resources—financial and otherwise—to academic departments, faculty, support staff and service programs, and students (Rose, 2010).

Colleges need to more consistently draw upon students’ perspectives and strengths in their efforts to minimize the barriers that they face as their pathways lead them from basic skills into college-level coursework. The students in our study laid bare the lack of

orientation to placement exams as well as the effects of limited pedagogy and lack of understanding and care on the part of some basic skills instructors. These reflections remind us that in order for community colleges to provide an equitable educational pathway, they must pay closer attention to the ways that students are placed into developmental education and their experiences once they are there. If community colleges are truly committed to improving success rates for low-income students, a greater focus on procedures and instruction can improve the matriculation of those who feel stuck behind the wall of remediation.

## Notes

- 1 The terms basic skills education, developmental education, and remedial education are used interchangeably in this report.
- 2 As Long's (2005) study suggests, basic skills students are less likely than non-remediated students to persist in college. But this is not an appropriate test of the impact of remedial courses. In their multivariate analysis, Attewell et al. (2006) found that students who passed remedial courses were actually more likely to graduate than similar students who never took remedial courses. While overall graduation rates at two-year colleges are quite low, and remediation does cause a modest delay in students' time to degree, poor high school preparation is as much a causal factor as college remediation in lowering graduation rates.
- 3 Similarly, Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes "empowerment agents"—adults with particular motivational and ideological characteristics who are willing to work counter to established and hierarchical social structures.
- 4 Instructors who operate from within a deficit framework typically believe that when students "achieve poorly," they must be "fixed" because the problem is inherent in the student, not in social institutions that provide sub-standard services. Their instructional practices tend to reflect this belief. This is in contrast to an asset-based approach, which builds on the strengths that students bring to the classroom (see, for example, Gutierrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Rose, 2011).

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