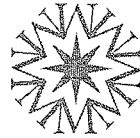


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Minnesota  
STATE COLLEGES  
& UNIVERSITIES

**Final Report:  
Developmental Education Demonstration Project  
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities  
January 9, 2004**

This report is prepared in fulfillment of the requirements of Chapter 1, Article 2, Section 26 of the 2001 First Special Session Laws of Minnesota. It describes how each subdivision of Section 26, Developmental Education Demonstration Project, was met and, as required, reports on the college enrollment and placement of participating students, changes in college readiness, the effectiveness of the demonstration project, estimated costs of the project, and recommendations for future efforts.

**Project Development.** Following passage of Senate File 2343 during the 2001 legislative session (which ultimately became Section 26 of Chapter 1, Article 2, 2001 First Special Session Laws of Minnesota), the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities began work on the provision of that bill directing the system to “implement a comprehensive demonstration project designed to increase the number of high school graduates who are academically prepared to enroll in college level courses.” The approach to this goal as specified in legislation was to “administer college readiness assessment tests in math, reading, and writing to all students in the designated school districts, in the first quarter of the student’s junior year of high school.”

In Summer 2001, staff of the Office of the Chancellor consulted with key staff at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning and at interested colleges and universities about project implementation. Subsequently, several colleges and universities contacted superintendents in their regions to determine interest in participating in the project. Most discovered that districts, while interested in the potential outcomes of the project, were unwilling to commit to additional testing given the extent of other required assessments. This was especially true of large districts, which noted the difficulty of the statute’s requirement that all juniors in participating districts be administered the full college placement test.

Itasca Community College (ICC), which already had several years of successful experience administering college placement tests to students in Floodwood and Greenway High Schools, indicated a willingness to participate in the project. Bemidji State University (BSU) agreed to join the project as well, building on a history of collaboration with ICC and with neighboring schools. Collectively, these two institutions secured the participation of five high schools – Kelliher, Roseau, Floodwood, Deer River, and Greenway – in the demonstration project.

**Project Implementation.** In Fall 2001, college placement tests were administered to a total of 366 juniors in Kelliher, Roseau, Greenway, Floodwood, and Deer River High Schools. In addition, ICC gave a short career survey to students. BSU notified students in advance, in writing, about the purpose and nature of the tests to be administered and awarded funds to the junior class in each school as an incentive to participate. ICC provided similar information in advance, in writing, to parents and, as they had done previously, provided each student with a modest incentive (pizza coupons for Greenway and Deer River students and “Floodwood Bucks” to Floodwood students).

Tests were scored and the results analyzed and subsequently shared with students, teachers, and counselors early in 2002. ICC also shared information about student performance with parents, although they were disappointed that no parents attended sessions scheduled to discuss the findings. Information was provided about how to understand test scores and the level of readiness needed for college-level work. Students who did not test as college-ready were given specific advice about courses to select as high school seniors in order to improve their readiness. Students who tested as "college ready" were informed about the importance of taking rigorous courses as high school seniors in order to maintain and improve their skills and knowledge.

For phase two of the project, the project team decided to test all high school seniors in the five project high schools in Spring 2003, rather than waiting to determine which of the students tested as juniors subsequently enrolled in a college or university within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and then collecting their test scores. This provided a larger sample, with results not dependent on the ability to track students after graduation from high school. It also afforded the opportunity to administer a short student survey designed to assess whether and how students had used the information they had been given and to collect information about their college-going plans. Finally, it enabled students planning to attend a system college or university to complete placement testing requirements in advance of enrolling in that institution. As was the case with initial test administration, students were notified in advance, in writing, about the testing, and ICC notified parents as well. Modest incentives for participation were again provided. Scores were reported to students in writing prior to graduation.

**Project Results and Impact.** To assess improvements in student readiness, placement levels in math, English, and reading based on scores from tests administered in the junior year were compared with scores from tests administered in the senior year. Because of changes in the student population and absences on testing days, not all students who were tested as juniors in 2001 were also tested as seniors, and not all seniors tested in 2003 had also been tested as juniors. The data below are based on the writing scores of 231 students and the mathematics and reading scores of 230 students who were tested both as juniors and seniors. Overall, 405 students were tested over the course of the project, and the number of students testing as college-prepared increased on each assessment, although some gains were modest. Specifically, the following results were reported:

- In reading, 90 juniors tested as being ready for college-level work and 140 tested as not being college ready in Fall 2001. In Spring 2003, 127 of these students, now high school seniors, tested as college ready, while 103 still assessed as not being college ready.
- In English, 132 juniors tested as college ready and 99 juniors assessed at below college level in Fall 2001. In Spring 2003, the number of college-ready seniors had increased to 165, while the number assessed as below college level had dropped to 66.
- In mathematics, 27 juniors tested as college ready and 203 juniors tested as not being college ready in Fall 2001. In Spring 2003, 62 of these same students tested as college ready, while 168 still tested as not being college ready.
- Among the 237 students assessed in the project who were enrolled in and/or had indicated plans to attend a postsecondary institution after graduation, 128 students (38% of graduates) were enrolled in a Minnesota state college or university in Fall 2003. This included 96 students (28.5% of graduates) enrolled in a two-year college and 32 students (9.5%) enrolled in a state university. An almost identical number of graduates (129 students) who reported postsecondary plans were not enrolled in a system institution in Fall 2003. Sixty-eight of the students assessed in the project were not high school graduates as of Fall 2003.

- The survey revealed that 39.3% of the participating students found the results helpful in planning for their futures, but only 9.1% of those responding reported that the test results influenced their selection of courses for their senior year.

**Project Costs.** In the absence of legislative funding to undertake the demonstration project, the Office of the Chancellor reallocated funding to support it. This included first year funding (FY 2002) in the amount of \$40,000 (\$22,000 for Bemidji State University and \$18,000 for Itasca Community College) and second year funding (FY 2003) of \$30,000 (\$12,000 to BSU and \$18,000 to ICC). FY 2003 funding was adjusted based on actual costs in FY 2002 and on anticipated costs of project completion, and campuses were allowed to plan to carry some funding forward into FY 2004 to support completion of data analysis and reporting. Costs incurred included the purchase of test booklets and testing supplies; travel to administer tests and meet as a project team; staff and student assistance (with test administration, scoring, reporting, and analysis); project coordination; and incentives for high school students and staff.

**Project Findings.** The demonstration project has revealed both potential benefits of administering college placement tests to high school students and limitations to this approach. Following are the key findings of the project team.

- *Projects like this one provide valuable opportunities to build or strengthen effective relationships between high schools and colleges/universities.* It is clear that secondary and postsecondary institutions need to communicate more effectively and better align their expectations for students. This project offers one means to that end, including opportunities to collaboratively review high school curriculum, college/university preparation expectations, and the ways in which the two might be better aligned and communicated to students and parents. Both Bemidji State University and Itasca Community College felt that participating in the project helped foster communication and cooperation between their institutions and their partner high schools.
- *Administering college placement tests to high school students offers potentially valuable opportunities to help students understand the connection between high school coursework and postsecondary preparation.* Too often, students are unaware of the ways in which high school courses prepare them for college-level learning. This is especially true for two-year institutions, whose open admissions mission can be misinterpreted as indicating that no academic preparation is needed to be admitted to and be successful in their programs. Helping students see the connections between high school and college level coursework can help them make better academic decisions in high school, leading to better preparation and less wasted time and resources on developmental courses.
- *The full and active support of a school district and flexibility in implementation are critical to the effectiveness of a project such as this one.* Schools and districts have many, often competing demands for classroom time and a growing set of expectations to assess student performance. The addition of another test to an already full learning “agenda” can strain school and district resources. In addition, to realize the value of the approach used in this project, the testing strategy must be connected with student counseling and district learning priorities. This is not a “one size fits all” approach.
- *The ability to determine the impact of this project is limited by its construct and by variables influencing course selection, course availability, and individual student performance.* The high schools involved were all small, rural schools that differ in some significant ways from

larger, urban and suburban schools. Class registration timelines did not always fit project testing and reporting timelines. Since this was not a “high stakes” test, students may not have felt a need to do their best; as a result, scores may not accurately reflect their skills and knowledge. Finally, without a control group, there is no way to determine whether learning gains resulted from the project or reflected learning growth typical of the time period between administrations of the two tests. In short, we can draw no clear conclusions about the impact of the project on student learning, nor can we generalize to larger scale implementation.

- *The parents of students involved in this project made almost no effort to learn more about the project or their children’s performance.* As a result, we have no way to assess whether they found the information provided to be useful and whether, or how, they used it to help their children prepare for college. This was a major disappointment, given the presumed importance of parental guidance and support for student learning, course choices, and other educational decisions. The prospect of providing a new forum for communicating with parents was not realized through the activities of this pilot project.
- *Care must be taken in drawing conclusions about the results of assessments used for purposes other than those for which they were developed.* College placement tests are developed and normed for purposes of determining the readiness of students who have graduated from high school or are close to graduation. Further, they are designed to assess student readiness to successfully complete certain basic, freshman-level courses and, as such, they do not assess the full array of skills and knowledge deemed necessary for all high school graduates. When administered to students earlier in high school and for purposes other than course placement, they provide data that should always be used as just one set of information helpful in assessing and guiding student learning.

**Project Recommendations.** As noted above, no clear conclusions can be drawn from this project, given its scope and limitations. Given that reality and the cost of implementation, we cannot recommend that the approach taken in this pilot project be mandated. Further, mandating any single approach to improving student preparation, including this method of using college placement tests with high school students, would fail to recognize what we learned about the importance of building effective relationships and tailoring project strategies to fit school, district, and postsecondary needs and realities.

However, the potential benefits of using college placement tests to help high school students better understand the preparation needed for postsecondary education and make effective educational choices justify further exploration of this approach. More than a dozen other colleges and universities in Minnesota are already using or exploring similar strategies to better connect with high schools. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are committed to sharing information across the system and with P-12 partners about a variety of potential strategies to improve student preparation. The findings and experiences gained from this project will help inform those on-going efforts.