Redesigning the College Intake Process as an On-Ramp to a Program of Study

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One of the first experiences for students entering a community college or open-access four-year institution is to take a standardized placement test to determine whether they are academically prepared for college. Students who are deemed not ready for college—the majority in most community colleges—are referred to a prerequisite sequence of remedial courses focused on reading, composition, and math (particularly algebra). The assumption is that completing this sequence will prepare them to succeed in college-level work.

However, CCRC research finds that relying on standardized tests leads to high rates of misplacement, including substantial *underplacement* (in which students are referred to remediation when they could have passed their first college-level English or math courses). Moreover, the most rigorous studies find that, rather than build students' skills for college, developmental education as it is typically practiced tends to divert students onto a remedial track. It is perhaps not surprising that nearly half of new community college students leave within the first term or two, and that the majority who take developmental education fail to pass college-level courses in English and math, let alone enter a program of study and complete a college credential.

Here we present a framework for rethinking the college intake process from one that sorts many students onto a remedial track to one designed to help *all* students successfully enter a college program of study. This approach, which is illustrated in Figure 1, differs from the conventional model in several ways.

Figure 1. College Intake Process as an On-Ramp to a Program of Study
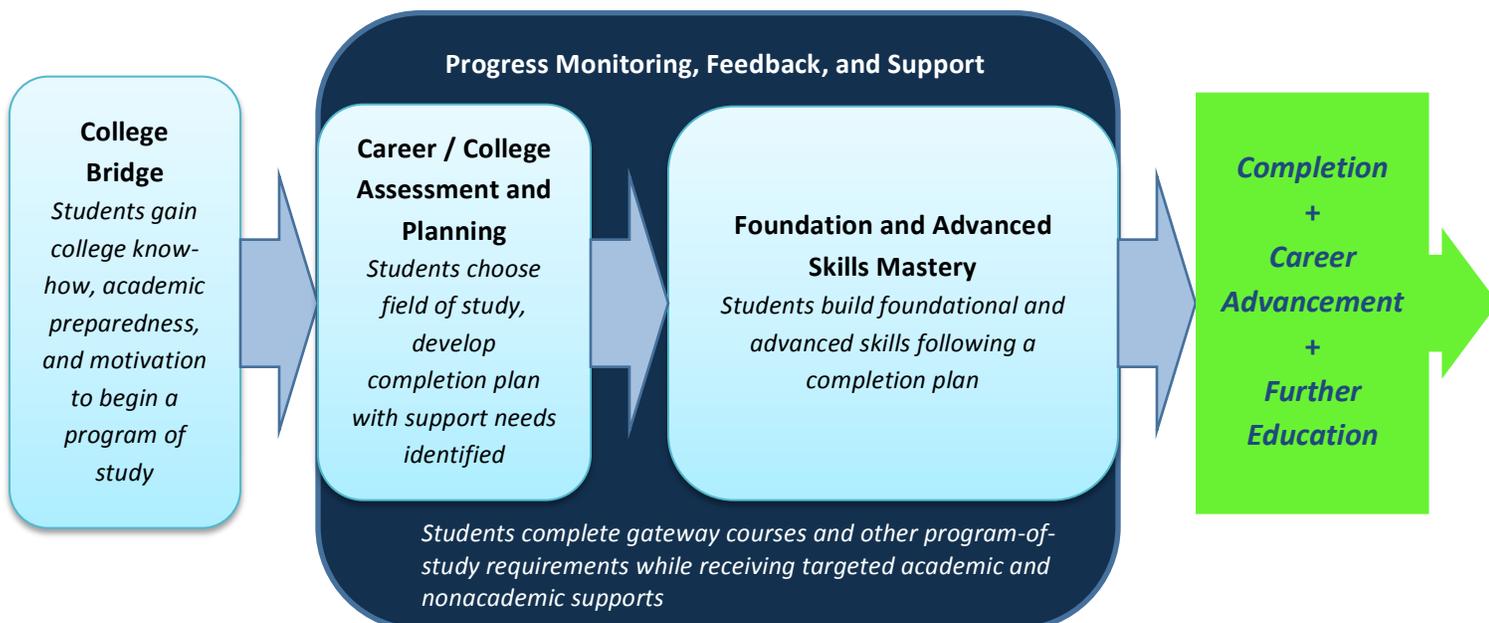
In most colleges, career exploration and college planning are not prominent parts of the new student experience, even though many (if not most) students enter college without clear goals—or even an understanding of their options. Career services are typically available, but only for students who seek them out. And most colleges do not require students to develop an academic plan. In the intake model we propose, a key aim is to help new students choose a major or at least a field of interest to explore as soon as possible—ideally from the start—and to develop and begin to follow a plan for completing a program in their field of interest. This assumes that the pathways into and through a college's programs have been clearly mapped out, with learning outcomes aligned with the requirements for success in further education and employment. Clearly mapping out program paths makes it possible to focus pre-college preparation on orienting and preparing students to enter particular fields of study, instead of on college generally as is now the case.

Rather than assessing new students to decide whether or not they should be placed into a remedial track, the goal of assessment in the on-ramp is mainly to diagnose students' needs for support. Students vary in the skills they bring to college, so the services provided to students should take account of those skills. And certainly students with weak academic skills need some form of assistance. Whereas now the focus of college readiness is on math and English, a goal of a redesigned on-ramp is to provide students with the academic support they need to successfully complete the key "gateway courses" in the student's field of interest—such as introductory business, psychology, biology, and anatomy and physiology—in addition to the appropriate math and English courses. Instruction in foundation skills should be aligned and where appropriate integrated with the college-level curriculum (through, for example, contextualization or co-requisite instruction), rather than provided as separate, pre-requisite activities as is now generally the case.

Throughout the intake process and indeed entire programs, each student's progress in meeting clearly defined milestones is closely monitored. Frequent feedback is given to all students, and targeted support is provided for those who are not making progress or who are straying off-plan. In such a system, the key metrics for measuring student progress are whether students are completing critical program milestones and requirements defined by faculty and advisors and doing so in a timely fashion.

The on-ramp approach marries innovations in developmental education and efforts to build clearer, more educationally coherent pathways to student end goals. Until recently, developmental education and guided pathways reforms have proceeded on separate tracks, but now a growing number of institutions are bringing them together to prepare more students, including the many who arrive poorly prepared for college, to enter and complete a program. Figure 2 shows promising strategies developed through developmental education and guided pathways reforms that can implemented under each of the key components of a program on-ramp. Exemplars for each strategy are listed in the endnotes. All of these strategies have at least some evidence to support them. In most cases, studies find a modest positive effect, although the effect diminishes over time. However, research on organizational effectiveness strongly indicates that, for strategies across the components of an on-ramp to have the greatest effect on student outcomes, they should be implemented in concert with one another as part of an integrated approach.

Figure 2. Strategies for Enabling Students to Enter a College Program

College Bridge	Career / College Assessment and Planning	Foundation and Advanced Skills Mastery
- Program-focused dual enrollment[1] - Transition courses[2] - Early college high schools[3] - High school career academies[4] - Bootcamps[5] - ABE-to-college bridge programs[6]	- Program-focused orientation[7] - Multiple measures to indicate overall level of readiness[8] - Initial in-class diagnostic assessment[9] - Diagnostic tests for modularized placement[10] - Required exploratory/meta majors[11] - Required program plans based on career exploration/advising[12] - Required field-specific success courses[13] - Predictive analytics[14]	- Co-requisite remediation[15] - Math pathways[16] - Integrated/Backward design[17] - Compressed courses[18] - Modularized curricula[19] - Learning communities[20] - Innovative instructional strategies - Contextualization[21] - Productive Persistence[22] - Reading Apprenticeship[23] - Integrated reading & writing[24] - Competency-based/mastery learning[25]
	Progress Monitoring, Feedback, and Support	
	- Intrusive advising by program embedded advisors[26] - E-advising[27] - Early warning systems[28] - Predictable scheduling[29] - Incentives for full-time enrollment[30] - Cohort enrollment[31]	

No institution we know of has fully integrated strategies across all of these components, although Guttman Community College, the new CUNY community college, may come closest. The City Colleges of Chicago and public two- and four-year institutions under the Tennessee Board of Regents are in the process of rethinking developmental education and the intake system more generally to create more effective on-ramps to programs as part of larger guided pathways reforms. We have much to learn from these and other on-going efforts to help students—as efficiently as possible—get on a path toward successfully completing a program of study that will equip them to achieve goals for further education and careers.

Endnotes: Strategy Exemplars

[1] Community College of Denver and Aurora Public Schools; North Carolina Career and College Promise Program (Session Law 2011-145).

[2] CUNY At Home in College program (transitional math and English courses in 62 public high schools), Tennessee Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS), Virginia College and Career Readiness Initiative.

[3] See Jobs for the Future's Early College High School Initiative for examples.

[4] See MDRC Career Academies: Exploring College and Career Options impact evaluation for examples.

[5] CUNY Immersion, El Paso Community College (PREP Program), Miami Dade College Summer Bridge, Texas Developmental Summer Bridge Demonstration.

[6] Washington State Community and Technical College System (I-BEST).

[7] Queensborough Community College CUNY, Santa Fe College (FL).

[8] Longbeach City College (Promise Pathways), North Carolina Community College System (multiple measures for placement using high school transcript GPA and/or standardized test scores [effective fall 2015]).

[9] Cuyahoga Community College.

[10] Texas Success Initiative (diagnostic assessment for course placement), Valencia College (P.E.R.T-M, a math diagnostic assessment, to assign students to appropriate math modules), Virginia Community College System (Virginia Placement Test–Math [VPT-M]).

[11] Arizona State University (exploratory majors), Austin Peay University (mega-majors), City Colleges of Chicago (focus areas), Florida State University (exploratory majors), Guttman Community College CUNY (limited majors and common first-year career exploration curriculum), Queensborough Community College CUNY (freshman academies), Santa Fe College (FL) (all students required to choose a field on entry).

[12] Arizona State University, ASU – Maricopa Community College MAPPs), Austin Peay University, City Colleges of Chicago, Florida State University, St. Petersburg College (FL).

[13] Guttman CC CUNY (City Seminar).

[14] Arizona State University, Austin Peay University (TN).

[15] Community College of Baltimore County ALP; Tennessee Community Colleges.

[16] Carnegie Foundation (Statway/Quantway), Los Medanos College (CA) (Path2Stats), University of Texas Dana Center (Mathways Project).

[17] Chabot College (Accelerated English), Montgomery County Community College (PA) (Concepts of Numbers), Guttman Community College CUNY (Statistics and Composition).

[18] Community College of Denver (FastStart@CCD math), North Carolina Community Colleges (developmental English).

[19] Tennessee Community Colleges (developmental math), North Carolina Community Colleges (developmental math), Virginia Community Colleges (developmental math).

[20] Evergreen State College, Kingsborough Community College CUNY.

[21] Washington State Community and Technical Colleges (I-BEST), Guttman Community College CUNY.

[22] Carnegie Foundation (Statway/Quantway), University of Texas Dana Center (Mathways Project).

[23] California Community Colleges (Reading Apprenticeship Project), Renton Technical College (WA) (RATS), WestEd (Reading Apprenticeship research).

[24] Chabot College (CA) (Accelerated Developmental English), Virginia Community College System (Developmental English), North Carolina Community College System (Developmental English).

[25] Southern New Hampshire University (College for America), Virginia Community College System (developmental math).

[26] CUNY ASAP, Florida State University, Miami Dade College, Santa Fe College (FL).

[27] Arizona State U (eAdvisor), Austin Peay University (Degree Compass), Santa Fe College (FL) (My Status/Degree Audit).

[28] Montgomery County Community College (PA), Purdue University (Signals).

[29] CUNY ASAP, St. Petersburg College.

[30] Adams State University, Colorado (Finish in Four), University of Hawaii (15 to Finish), University of New Mexico (VISTA Scholarship), West Virginia public two- and four-year institutions (Promise Scholarship).

[31] CUNY ASAP, Guttman Community College CUNY.