Developmental Education Self-Placement Approaches: Considerations When Designing With Equity in Mind

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Executive summary

Colleges around the country are experimenting with alternative strategies to placement testing for their entering students. They have been driven to do so for a variety of reasons:

- There is clear evidence that placement tests are poorly predictive of college success.[i]

- Traditional placement mechanisms have over-placed Black, Hispanic, low-income and first-generation students into developmental education, thereby increasing the cost of their college educations while reducing the likelihood they will earn a college degree.[ii]

- The COVID-19 pandemic has made traditional placement mechanisms impractical or impossible.[iii]

Self-placement approach

One increasingly popular approach is *self-placement*, in which students take an active role in the placement process. Institutions and states use a variety of terms to refer to self-placement, including Directed Self Placement, Direct Placement, Guided Self-Placement and Informed Placement, among others. They also take a variety of approaches to self-placement, as this brief illustrates.

Self-placement models have been shown to increase the proportion of entering students placing directly into college-level courses, and the percentage of entering cohorts completing gateway college courses within a year of matriculation.[iv] However, in some instances, they also exacerbate gaps between Black and white students, and across genders.[v] Early evidence indicates that the structure of the self-placement model influences the extent to which it widens gaps across student groups, as does the type of training and support provided to advisors, faculty and staff.

How self-placement may support equity for racially minoritized students

This brief shares the approaches taken by colleges around the country, with an eye toward understanding how self-placement can support ongoing, focused efforts to increase equity, such that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes.[vi] Our hope is that colleges will use the strategies outlined in this brief to design their own self-placement systems with equity at the center. By this, we mean engaging in a process that, *from the outset*, seeks to identify the student groups that may be marginalized by current or future systems, surface barriers within those systems and create an approach that deliberately removes those barriers. Designing with equity at the center aims to create more equitable educational practices, processes and behaviors, such that students from all backgrounds feel included and supported on campus, and have effective learning opportunities that honor their strengths and cultural backgrounds.

We are particularly focused on ensuring equity for student groups historically excluded from higher education and for whom higher education was not designed,

including Black, Latinx, Indigenous and first-generation students. However, in many instances, other student sub-groups, including students who are poverty-impacted, parenting, female, military-connected or justice-involved may also need to be the focus of equity-focused efforts. It should be noted that most self-placement efforts are too new to be formally assessed for impact, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made evaluation particularly challenging. Therefore, we highlight these efforts with the important caveat that further research may show these approaches to be less-effective than expected, or to support the success of racially minoritized, poverty-impacted, parenting or other student groups disproportionately impacted by previous educational structures less-well than anticipated.

Key Takeaways

Several strategies emerged from the institutions highlighted in this brief. When designing a self-placement system, colleges may want to consider these suggestions and design their practices accordingly.

Trust students.

The promising evidence for some forms of self-placement models, coupled with research indicating that student self-report data is as accurate as transcript data, indicates that students can and should be given the agency to select their courses.

Train advisors.

While many campuses are providing professional development around implicit bias and student growth mindset, few are explicitly connecting these concepts to self-placement or exploring faculty growth mindset. Colleges should work to provide ongoing professional learning for advisors and other student-facing personnel to support them in integrating asset-based framing in their practices, such that advising conversations focus on strengths, resources and helping students envision themselves in college coursework.

Connect placement with support.

Students who are hesitant to enter college courses may be less reluctant if they understand the types of support available to them. However, placing them directly in college courses, honoring their strengths and giving them agency only works if institutions change their practices to ensure student success. Embedding supports and making sure that students understand that they are available and how to access them is critical.

Communicate for clarity.

Campuses engaged in self-placement have found that formal higher education words are often meaningless or, worse, intimidating for students. Terms like "corequisite" or "quantitative reasoning" feel opaque and inhibit a sense of belonging, thereby discouraging students from engaging in such courses. Shifting language to terms like "group support" or "college math" may generate more confidence.

Introduction

Colleges around the country are experimenting with alternative strategies to placement testing for their entering students. They have been driven to do so for a variety of reasons: because there is clear evidence that placement tests are poorly predictive of college success;[i] because traditional placement mechanisms have over-placed Black, Hispanic, low-income and first-generation students into developmental education, thereby increasing the cost of their college educations while reducing the likelihood they will earn a college degree;[ii] and because the COVID-19 pandemic has made traditional placement mechanisms impractical or impossible.[iii]

One increasingly popular approach is *self-placement*, in which students take an active role in the placement process. Institutions and states use a variety of terms to refer to self-placement, including Directed Self Placement, Direct Placement, Guided Self-Placement and Informed Placement, among others. They also take a variety of approaches to self-placement, as this brief illustrates.

Self-placement models have been shown to increase the proportion of entering students placing directly into college-level courses, and the percentage of entering cohorts completing gateway college courses within a year of matriculation.[iv] However, in some instances, they also exacerbate gaps between Black and white students, as well as across genders.[v] Early evidence indicates that the structure of the self-placement model used by institutions influences the extent to which it widens gaps across student groups, as does the type of training and support provided to advisors, faculty and staff.

This brief shares the approaches taken by colleges around the country, with an eye toward understanding how self-placement can support ongoing, focused efforts to increase equity, such that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes.[vi] Our hope is that colleges will use these strategies in their own work, designing future self-placement systems with equity at the center. By this, we mean engaging in a process that, *from the outset,* seeks to identify the student groups that may be marginalized by current or future systems, identify barriers within those systems, and create self-placement approaches that deliberately remove those barriers. Designing with equity at the center aims to create more equitable educational practices, processes and behaviors, such that students from all backgrounds feel included and supported on campus, and have effective learning opportunities that honor their strengths and cultural backgrounds.

We are particularly focused on ensuring equity for student groups historically excluded from higher education and for whom higher education was not designed, including Black, Latinx, Indigenous and first-generation students. However, in many instances, other student sub-groups, including students who are poverty-impacted, parenting, female, military-connected or justice-involved may also need to be the focus of equity-focused efforts.[vii]

It should be noted that most self-placement efforts are too new to be formally assessed for impact, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made evaluation particularly

challenging. Therefore, we highlight these efforts with the important caveat that further research may show these approaches to be less-effective than expected, or to support the success of racially minoritized, poverty-impacted, parenting or other student groups disproportionately impacted by previous educational structures less-well than anticipated.

What is self-placement?

Self-placement is an approach that relies on student self-assessments (rather than or in addition to external assessments or transcripts) to determine students' placement in math and English courses. In practice, self-placement refers to a continuum of approaches that varies in the extent to which students have the power to make their own placement decisions. These approaches also vary in the extent to which campuses create structures to ensure that students are clearly informed about their options.

As such, self-placement approaches range from students reporting data—such as high school grades, which are used by the college to generate a course placement—to systems in which colleges systematically provide information on course content and structure, coupled with student self-reflection tools, to enable students to make their own placement choices.

Benefits of guided self-placement

We share ideas from a variety of self-placement approaches in this brief. However, we would argue that truly guided or informed self-placement requires that students are empowered to make their own placement decisions and that colleges make intentional efforts to provide clear guidance to support students' decision-making process.

Such an approach trusts students and expresses confidence in their self-awareness and inherent abilities. When done with equity at the center, it forces institutions to think about the ways that implicit and explicit messages may depress students' choices and puts the onus on institutions to create systems that are navigable, understandable and informative. Such mindfulness is an important aspect of building institutions that promote equitable outcomes across student groups.

APPROACHES TO SELF-PLACEMENT

Information gathered

- **Your past experience:** Student self-reported data, such as high school GPA, exam scores and high school courses taken

- **Have you seen it, can you solve it:** Questions that illustrate the type of problems or readings confronted in key courses and ask students if they think they could complete them successfully

- **How do you feel about it:** Questions designed to gauge students' confidence in, comfort with or productive persistence regarding college and college course content

Placement process

- **Placement decision:** Students are placed by the institution, using their data

- **Recommended placement:** Students receive a recommended placement, which they discuss with an advisor and may revise

- **Informed self-placement:** Students select their course placement in conjunction with institutional information and support

Why institutions are using self-placement

Colleges are using self-placement systems for a variety of reasons.

Removing barriers to data reporting

In moving away from standardized assessments, which have been shown to have low predictive validity, colleges are implementing multiple-measures systems that use high school data and other measures to more accurately identify students who may need support in college-level courses.[viii] Using students' self-reported data is logistically simpler than obtaining standardized data, yet accurate.[ix] And the use of self-reported data has accelerated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many colleges had to quickly find alternatives to standardized assessments and high school transcripts.[x]

Garnering student buy-in and trust

Beyond logistical reasons, campuses are moving toward self-placement approaches because doing so enables them to elevate student voice, express trust in students, and—they often hope—reduce gaps among demographic groups by removing implicit or explicit bias from placement systems.[xi] In addition, early adopters of self-placement approaches report that students are more bought-in to the placement process, find it more accurate and are less likely to challenge their placement when they have a say in their course options.

Increasing gateway course completion rates

Institutions are also encouraged by a growing body of evidence that self-placement approaches increase the number of students entering and completing gateway college-credit courses.[xii]

Equity implications for self-placement approaches

While institutions are encouraged by a growing body of evidence that self-placement approaches increase the number of students entering and completing gateway college-credit courses, there is also evidence that they can exacerbate gaps across racial groups and genders. In Florida, where recent high school graduates may choose whether or not to enroll in developmental courses, Black and female students were more likely to enroll in such courses compared to students from other backgrounds.[xiii]

In another study, self-placement had differential effects on students from different backgrounds, with male students more likely to complete college math and earn 30 college credits but women seeing no impact. Moreover, white and Asian students benefitted from self-placement, but Black and Hispanic students saw fewer or no positive impacts.[xiv] There is also evidence from other studies that advisors and faculty, as well as students themselves, carry implicit biases that can color self-placement decisions.[xv]

These findings make it critical that campuses are attentive to equity implications when they design and implement self-placement approaches. Although research into which approaches are most likely to close gaps within self-placement models is nascent, some approaches appear more promising than others. The remainder of this brief highlights self-placement approaches, with an emphasis on the ways that campuses try to ensure that their processes close gaps rather than widen them.

It should be noted that, in many places, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to measure the impact of these approaches, and that is a critical next step. However, the urgency of this moment and the rapidity with which colleges are adopting self-placement means that it is important to elevate approaches that are designed with equity in mind and which build on past efforts to reduce barriers for student groups historically excluded from higher education. For purposes of this brief, we asked colleges to describe equity strategies based on their own definitions of the term. We provide these examples as starting points, with the explicit recognition that self-placement will need to be refined and improved as additional evidence emerges.

Practice profiles: how campuses are approaching self-placement

SUNY Orange

Placement using self-reported information

Their approach

SUNY Orange started exploring self-placement options as a replacement for high-stakes testing in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the transition, and the college launched a student self-report placement model for math in 2020.

Upon completion of the admissions application, students fill out a self-assessment via a Google Form. The self-assessment asks for students':

- Past course-taking and grades
- Overall high school grade point average
- Comfort level with mathematics

The instrument also provides sample math problems and asks students to assess how easily they could complete them. The survey results are placed into an Excel formula, developed by the math department, that generates a placement for the student.

Students are informed of their placement during orientation, and in their student portal. After orientation, advisors meet with students to explain their placement and revise it based on their program, if necessary. Advisors also check with the student to see if the placement feels appropriate. Students who want to move up a placement level are directed to the math department, which provides them with additional information about course choices, course expectations and background knowledge necessary for course success.

Equity strategies

SUNY Orange is taking a continuous improvement approach to self-placement. All advisors have been trained in implicit bias and the advising department continues to emphasize ways to "not clip students' wings" during advising conversations. In addition, the college is piloting additional questions in the self-assessment that explore students' growth mindset[xvi] in an attempt to counteract an emerging trend of Black students placing themselves lower than other student groups. The college is currently evaluating the correlation between those questions and students' math

THE COLLEGE	
Location	Orange County, New York, north of New York City
Campuses	**2**
Annual enrollment	**~4,500**
Student body	**63%** female
2% Asian
3% multiracial
15% Black
26% Hispanic
45% white
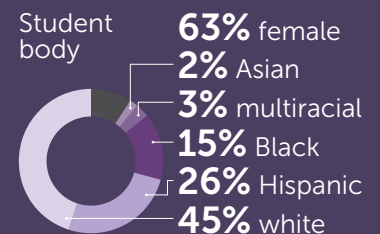
performance; should there be one, the college plans to use the growth mindset questions as a way to "bump up" students' placement to a higher level when possible.

Outcomes

Because self-placement is new and was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, the college is just starting to assess outcomes. During the first semester, fewer students were placed into developmental education. However, the college has not yet disaggregated data by race or gender.

Virginia Community College System

"We advise, you decide"

Their approach

The Virginia Community College System began exploring self-placement in 2018, launching a pilot process with nine institutions. Remaining colleges will implement self-placement by 2022.

VCCS has taken a two-pronged approach to self-placement, which it calls "direct enrollment." For students who have graduated from high school in the past five years, placement is done via self-reported high school grade point averages and course taking. This information is collected immediately following completion of the college application and is used by the college to provide a placement decision according to a statewide formula.

Older students, for whom self-reported data may be less accurate, engage in an informed self-placement process. These students take a self-assessment, which is housed in the college's student portal or embedded in the application process. The assessment provides sample questions, asks students if they could complete them, and encourages them to reflect on their math and English experience and skills. Students then meet with an advisor to explore their answers and jointly determine their course placement. These conversations are holistic, seeking to understand students' personal circumstances and strengths, provide clear and relevant information to the student, connect students to resources as appropriate and guide them toward an informed placement decision.

Equity strategies

VCCS institutions rely on structured, holistic asset-based advising to avoid disadvantaging subgroups of students. This is particularly important for adult students participating in the less-directive placement process. Advisors work to create an advising experience that says to students, "Here are our options, what are you most comfortable with and how can we help you be successful?" They do this by:

- Exploring students' goals, aspirations and worries
- Guiding the conversation in ways that reduce the likelihood that students do not under-place themselves

THE SYSTEM

Colleges across the state	**23**
Annual enrollment	**~95,000**

- Making students aware of support opportunities to increase their confidence in higher placement options

Appointments often last up to 45 minutes, and advisors use strategies such as:

- Open-ended questions
- Discussion prompts, including clearly-laid-out program maps and sample questions
- Advising syllabi that outline advising goals and desired outcomes, and which support advising that elevates all students' capabilities and supports them in entering college-level courses wherever possible

To do this, campuses have had to engage in substantial professional development with advisors, some of which has come from the system office and some of which is campus-based. Campuses are building regular training cadences to enable ongoing conversations about the self-placement process, and engaging their faculty in discussions around student asset-based mindsets and the power of having students stretch themselves. Campuses are also working to address implicit bias. They are creating structured sources of information to ensure that all students receive clear messages, and advisors can leverage those sources to ensure that advising conversations are not inadvertently disadvantaging some groups of students.

Outcomes

Early results from the direct-placement pilot are positive. State system analyses find that enrollment and completion rates for gateway math increased, and that adult students who engaged in informed self-placement saw the strongest gains. These gains remain when data are disaggregated, with white, Black and Hispanic students all seeing increases in the percentage of students entering and completing gateway math.

At the campus level, institutions have not yet had a chance to dig into their data, but most expect to do so and to disaggregate by race and gender. Anecdotally, they believe that older students and women may be placing themselves lower than other student groups, especially in math. Should data confirm these expectations, colleges plan to refine and iterate their processes and professional development opportunities to address these differences.

EARLY OUTCOMES

Increased enrollment and completion rates

Early results from the direct-placement pilot are positive. State system analyses find that enrollment and completion rates for gateway math increased, and that the gains remain when data are disaggregated.

Santiago Canyon College

Including English Language Learners

Their approach

Santiago Canyon College has been engaged in developmental education reform for many years, which accelerated after California passed legislation in 2018 requiring, among other things, that institutions use high school grade point averages for placement, when available, or offer guided self-placement processes for students—in addition to the state's decades-long requirement that colleges employ multiple measures for placement.

Typically, English Language Learners are treated separately within developmental education reforms. The college explicitly builds a pathway for multilingual students into college English courses by connecting the traditional and ELL placement systems and curricula. Students who indicate on their college application that English is not their first language are sent an email describing the two options, American College English or the English 101 pathway. Students who decide to take the ACE self-assessment are provided with a link that leads them to a series of questions about their:

- Goals
- Academic history and experience learning in English
- Approaches to learning and growth mindset

Also included are sample reading passages with self-assessment questions about the student's ability to read and understand them.

Once self-assessed and placed into an English course, students can meet with a counselor who supports them in reaffirming or refining the placement decision. Most students are placed into an ACE course, but this assessment path also enables students to place directly into English 101, which is unusual among ELL pathways.

Following the self-assessment and placement, students can meet with a counselor who supports them in reaffirming or refining the placement decision. These conversations emphasize the skills necessary to be successful in college, as well as the resources available to students to ensure their success. The college has also created videos that explain course options and supports to reinforce this framing. At any time in this process, students can shift their placement and enter English 101.

Equity strategies

The key placement equity strategy at Santiago Canyon is the explicit pathway between ACE and gateway English, which ensures that English Language Learners have multiple opportunities to enter college courses. The college works to send the message to students that it believes they can succeed by offering conversations with faculty and advisors, and an array of supports.

THE COLLEGE

Location	Orange County, south of Los Angeles
Part of a two-college community college district	
Annual enrollment	~16,000
Student body	3% multiethnicity
	2% Black
	11% Asian/Pacific/Filipino
	28% white
	52% Latino
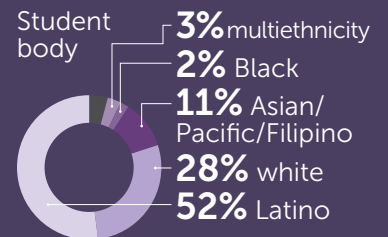
Outcomes

Santiago Canyon College is just beginning to explore outcomes. They are seeing lower numbers of students in ACE courses, possibly because more students are taking English 101 instead.

Community College of Baltimore County

Self-directed placement and the "right to succeed"

Their approach

Long a leader in developmental education reform, the Community College of Baltimore County began exploring self-placement in 2017 with the explicit goal of addressing a pattern of over-placing racially minoritized adult students into developmental education. CCBC piloted its self-directed placement process in spring 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and launched it at scale in fall 2020. The college takes a fully self-placed approach for students in English, meaning that the institution provides as much information to students as clearly as possible and then lets them make their own placement decision. CCBC has designed its system to convey to students, "You have experience. We will empower you." The self-assessment process uses an "agency-information-reflection" cycle to ensure that students have information and are guided to make choices that reflect their experiences, priorities and goals.

THE COLLEGE

Location	Baltimore County, Maryland
Campuses	**3**
Extension centers	**2**
Annual enrollment	**~25,000**
Student body	**3%** multiracial **6%** Asian **7%** Latino **35%** Black **45%** white

AGENCY AND INFORMATION

Entering students are provided with a self-assessment tool that can be accessed via mobile device, tablet or computer. The tool combines:

- Asset-based messaging about the purpose of the assessment
- Questions asking students to assess their strengths
- Written information about course options
- Videos of CCBC professors and students talking about the course options, including course content and strategies for success

REFLECTION

Students are asked about their experiences with reading and writing, are provided example assignments and asked to reflect on how they would feel, and what level of assistance and types of support they would need to analyze, discuss and use those readings in course-related tasks. Additionally, students are asked to write about how their experiences have prepared them for success at CCBC; select an English placement; and then write a brief paragraph explaining why they made the selection they did.
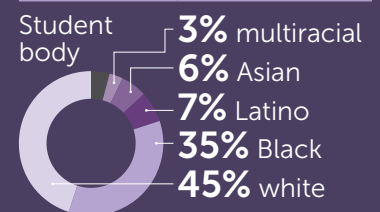
Students are encouraged to meet with advisors following the self-placement process to build a schedule. Advisors can access the self-placement responses but are not formally involved in the placement decision. Students who are confused about their options or want to revise their placement are referred to faculty members to discuss course choices, answer questions and come to a final placement decision.

Equity strategies

CCBC's approach relies heavily on research in social psychology indicating that asset-based framing and interventions that build social belonging can improve student persistence.[xvii] Therefore, the tools developed by the college aim to help students visualize themselves in different course options by showing them students who look like them with regards to race, gender and age talking about course options in concrete ways, while also providing strategies for success that can empower students to take academic risks.

Three faculty members from the English department worked with the college's digital media program to produce the videos in the self-assessment. They interviewed 40 students about their course experiences and edited them to help incoming students understand what a classroom looks like, see students who look like them and demystify the courses.

The language throughout the self-assessment emphasizes opportunities for support, rather than student deficits. By asking students to reflect on how their experiences have prepared them for college, the assessment sends the message that students can and will be successful. Within advising sessions, the emphasis is on what students can achieve and leans toward belief in students' capacity to succeed at any level. Finally, to support students after their placement, the School of Writing, Literacy & Languages, in which the English Department is housed, has elevated its support services and proactive outreach, and is working on integrating culturally responsive teaching and learning practices centered on belonging into its curricular offerings.

Outcomes

Early data are promising. During the pilot semester, students placed via self-directed placement were 10% more likely to re-enroll than those placed via standardized assessment, and self-directed placement students also registered for more classes. Mid-term data from the first semester of full implementation showed a nearly 50-point increase in the percentage of Black students registering for college-level courses.

EARLY OUTCOMES

Increased enrollment in college courses

Mid-term data from the first semester of full implementation showed a nearly 50-point increase in the percentage of Black students registering for college-level courses.

How self-placement might unintentionally inhibit equity

In speaking with colleges while preparing this brief, we found that even those intentionally designing their self-placement processes to improve equitable outcomes across student groups embedded activities that may do the opposite. While they framed their strategies as designed for equity, our analysis found that, in some cases, their practices may not achieve the stated goal. As colleges refine their approaches, we share these in the spirit of continuous improvement, noting that as institutions evolve their approaches, they should continue to interrogate their practices to address unintended or new barriers that might emerge.

Lack of agency

Some self-placement approaches use student self-report data or reflective questions, but do not provide students with the information or authority to make their own decisions. This means that, ultimately, placement remains the purview of the institution rather than the student, and that data points that often embed racial or class biases within them (e.g., grade point average or exam scores) may continue to be used for placement. As noted at the beginning of this brief, a true self-placement system takes the word "self" seriously, by empowering students themselves to make their own educational choices.

Student-initiated appeals processes

Often, students must take it upon themselves to question, appeal or overturn an initial placement. This means that they must have the confidence and comfort to reach out, question the institution and, perhaps, plead their case to an authority figure. First-generation and racially minoritized students are less likely to have the traditionally valued social capital or institutional confidence necessary to engage in such a process.[xviii]

Implicit messages

Meaning-making is cumulative, and students come to college with pre-existing understandings of what it means to take math or engage in college. These may intersect with their reflections and self-placements, for example, discouraging them from placing themselves into STEM. Messaging on websites (i.e., terminology) may also work at cross-purposes from an equity intent if it is overly complicated or framed in ways that make students question their abilities. The difference between "We want you to have what you need to be successful" and "We want to make sure you are ready" may be practically the same, but tonally different. The former conveys confidence and an institutional commitment to student success; the latter indicates that a student may not actually belong in college.

Conversational interpretation

Similarly, students may interpret conversations meant to warm up their aspirations as cooling out. "How does this placement feel?" may be used by advisors to help students self-assess and potentially bump up their placement, but may feel to students as a suggestion that their self-placement was wrong and that they should bump themselves down.

Practical strategies for building self-placement systems with equitable outcomes in mind

Although we need stronger evaluation to ensure that self-placement systems help close gaps between racial groups and genders (as well as other student populations, including parenting students, student veterans and students with low incomes), some practical strategies emerged from the institutions highlighted in this brief.

When designing a self-placement system, colleges should consider these suggestions and design their practices accordingly. Like many of the colleges and systems highlighted in this brief, we emphasize that building a self-placement model is a process, not a one-and-done reform. Institutions will want to assess and refine their systems using institutional data to continuously improve the likelihood that access to college credit courses and success in them improves, and that such success is not related to students' demographic characteristics.

Trust students.

The promising evidence for true self-placement models, coupled with research indicating that student self-report data is as accurate as transcript data,[xix] indicates that students can and should be given the agency to select their courses. The campus personnel with whom we spoke were clear that when given information on what is expected of them, students are aware of what they do and do not know, and will acknowledge gaps in their knowledge. If anything, students are too critical of themselves. Wherever possible, self-placement systems should ensure that students, not an algorithm or cut score, make placement decisions.

Train advisors.

Although advisors play a critical role in self-placement systems, we heard mixed emphasis on ensuring that advisors are systematically prepared to have conversations with students that empower and inform while elevating their placement whenever possible. Many campuses are providing professional development around implicit bias and student growth mindset, but few are explicitly connecting these concepts to self-placement or exploring faculty growth mindset.

Colleges should work to provide ongoing professional learning for advisors and other student-facing personnel to support them in integrating asset-based framing in their practices, such that advising conversations focus on strengths, resources and helping students envision themselves in college coursework. This training

should also help advisors understand the supports available to students and the potential benefits of entering gateway courses as soon as possible.

Connect placement with support.

Students who are hesitant to enter college courses may be less reluctant if they understand the types of support available to them. Institutions must provide students with clear information around support opportunities so that students are confident in bumping up and staff are comfortable encouraging such placement. Moreover, elevating students' placement, honoring their strengths and giving them agency only works if institutions change their practices to ensure student success. Embedding supports and making sure that students understand that they are available and how to access them is critical.

Communicate for clarity.

As noted throughout this brief, terminology matters. Campuses engaged in self-placement have found that formal, higher-education words are often meaningless or—worse—intimidating for students. Terms like "corequisite" or "quantitative reasoning" feel opaque and inhibit a sense of belonging, thereby discouraging students from engaging in such courses.

Shifting language to terms like "group support" or "college math" may generate more confidence. Similarly, the self-assessment process itself should be communicated in ways that intentionally and simply help students understand the steps they need to take, why and what will happen next.

Build belonging.

Research shows that students are more successful when they see that others who are like them have also been successful.[xx] They are also more successful when they are given clear success strategies and expectations, so that they can envision what is entailed and how their past experiences can support their future success.[xxi]

These strategies are particularly important for racially minoritized and first-generation learners.[xxii] Self-placement systems should leverage this research by integrating information on success strategies, highlighting current student experiences and connecting course information to students' past educational experiences. Doing so will reduce the likelihood that students will place themselves into developmental coursework.

Conclusion

Self-placement models are showing early signs of success in increasing the number of students entering and completing college-level gateway courses. However, in some instances, these approaches have also been shown to exacerbate gaps between Black and white students, as well as across genders. Because early evidence indicates that the structure of self-placement models influences equitable outcomes, institutions must design an approach with equity at the center from the very beginning.

For additional information
or if you would like help applying the strategies to your own institution, please contact **Melinda Karp, Phase Two Advisory, melinda@phasetwoadvisory.com**.

Methods

The information in this brief is drawn from interviews with 21 individuals in five states. Using networks from Strong Start to Finish and Phase Two Advisory, we identified states and institutions engaged in self-placement reforms. We invited individuals from a subset of institutions to participate in a conversation about their approach, selecting for geographic diversity. To expand participation outside of our networks, we snowball sampled from our initial list by asking participants and contacts to share the names and institutional affiliations of others engaged in self-placement reforms. In addition, we recruited participants via social media to cast as wide of a net as possible.

Conversations lasted approximately one hour, were conducted via Zoom and included one to three individuals from participating institutions. Prior to the conversation, we explained that we were interested in understanding self-placement approaches that work to achieve equitable outcomes for racially minoritized students and students with low incomes, but let participants further define "equity" according to their institutional and/or individual conceptions. We used a semi-structured interview protocol to explore colleges' rationales for, approaches to and iterations of self-placement approaches. We probed for equity strategies and requested efficacy data if it was available. During the conversations, we took detailed notes.

We analyzed notes thematically to identify common strategies, challenges and equity concerns, and to identify the categories of self-placement shared in this brief. The practice profiles shared here were selected for their representativeness of approaches identified in the data. Each profile was shared with campus or state representatives to ensure accuracy prior to publication. Of course, any errors are Phase Two Advisory's alone.

We shared emergent findings with external reviewers to check for face validity. This brief was reviewed by four external reviewers prior to finalization.

We again emphasize that the intent of this exploration was to understand self-placement approaches and strategies campuses used around the country, and how those approaches might reduce barriers for historically excluded student populations. Most strategies have not been evaluated comprehensively, so readers should be cautious in assuming that replication will automatically lead to more equitable outcomes.

Acknowledgments

Citations

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[vii]We acknowledge that "equity" has many definitions and is an evolving and contested construct. In addition, we acknowledge the many linguistic, cultural, and historical variations within student populations. Our definition aims to center the need to rethink institutional structures to ensure that all students, particularly those for whom higher education was not designed, have the opportunity to thrive within higher education.

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[xiii]Park, Woods, Hu, Jones, & Tandberg, 2018

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xvMaldonado, C. (2019). "Where your ethnic kids go": How counselors as first responders legitimate proper course placements for community college student. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 43*:4: 280-294; Kosiewicz & Ngo (2019); Ngo, F., Valesquez, D., & Melguizo, T. (2021). Faculty perspectives on using high school data in an era of placement testing reform. *Community College Review,* 1-24.

xviBuilding on the work of Carol Dweck and others, growth mindset refers to students' belief that achievement is rooted in effort rather than innate ability. A wide range of studies has found a correlation between growth mindset and positive academic outcomes.

xviiSee, for example, the work of Gregory Walton and David Yeager.

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