In 2013, the Florida Legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 1720, which called for all developmental education offered in the state to be accelerated, using one or more of the following instructional strategies: 1) co-requisite, 2) modularization, 3) compression, or 4) contextualization. The law also mandated changes in advising and student supports, and established meta-majors, which are a collection of academic programs that have common or related content. In addition, recent graduates of Florida public high schools (entering 9th grade in 2003-04 or later and graduating with a standard diploma) and active-duty military members are now exempt from assessment and placement into developmental education. Exempt students may still elect to be assessed, but they have the option to decline any referrals to developmental education. Students who do not meet the exemption criteria are required to be assessed, and if determined to have need must be presented with options for developmental education instruction. Colleges’ responses to the legislation have varied greatly, with many examples of innovation. The goal of this series is to document how colleges have responded to SB 1720 in order to highlight the decisions and processes colleges consider when implementing developmental education reform at scale.
St. Johns River State redesigned their developmental education program to offer three courses each in math, writing, and reading, with consistency across subjects in terms of credits and developmental strategies offered. All developmental courses lead to the gateway English or math courses—which were also revised. The college redesigned its orientation to educate students about their options, following its philosophy that “advising is teaching,” and embraced a positive, collaborative attitude along the way.

BEFORE SENATE BILL 1720

Before Senate Bill 1720, St. Johns River State College began implementing student success initiatives and redesigning their developmental education programs to better meet the needs of their students. The college moved to a comprehensive academic orientation and group-advising model in 2011. This two-hour required course allows advisors to provide groups of 20-24 new students with important information about institutional policies and practices and discuss initial placement recommendations, academic planning, programs of study, and student success resources available in a single meeting. Given the large advisor workloads and limited contact time with students, the group advisement model proved to be a more efficient, structured way to disseminate information to new students than the previous model of brief, one-on-one meetings.

SJR State had also recently implemented changes to the curriculum, which included reducing the number of courses in its developmental math, reading, and writing series and dramatically redesigning its gateway math course, intermediate algebra, to increase the quality of the course as well as student success rates. In March of 2010, the college’s “Math Redesign for College Readiness” project was selected as part of a Florida pilot program around development education redesign. The college also looked at student enrollment in each of the three-course, three-credit developmental education sequences in reading, writing, and math and, largely because few students were placed into the lowest level, the college was able to condense each subject into two three-credit courses.

RESPONSE TO SENATE BILL 1720

SJR State approached the changes required as part of Senate Bill 1720 energetically and collaboratively. In spring 2013, the college’s leadership began by meeting with teams across the college, from counselors and advisors to faculty, to explain the legislation and begin to develop a plan and process for implementation.

Quick Facts

Location: Palatka, FL

Campuses: 3

Setting: Suburban

Total Enrollment: 10,926

Student Demographics:

- Average age: 24
- Gender: 57% female, 43% male
- Race/ethnicity:
  - African-American: 10.3%
  - White: 74%
  - Hispanic: 6.4%
  - Asian: 2.2%
  - American-Indian: 0.4%
  - Pacific Islander: 0.3%
  - Multiple races: 2.3%
  - Not reported: 4.2%


Over the summer, a group of faculty, administrators, and staff from SJR State participated in collaborative meetings with their peers from colleges across the state. By the beginning of fall term 2014, the college had planned or held meetings to update SJR State’s counseling and advising processes, student intake, and student information systems.

In September 2014, the leadership formed a developmental education redesign team—which included academic affairs administrators, faculty from the math, reading, and writing departments, and the
directors of counseling and academic support from all three campuses—and held a retreat. Participants came together to develop math, reading, and writing developmental education plans for the college. One administrator noted that in contrast to the summer collaborative meetings, which were often tense, the retreat was a positive collaborative experience for SRJ State members. The college’s teams developed plans for three courses for each developmental education subject: a four-credit compressed course, and one- and two-credit modularized co-requisite courses. This simple menu enabled advisors to clearly explain the new course options to students in the group advising sessions.

COMPREHENSIVE ACADEMIC ORIENTATION

Senate Bill 1720 allows colleges to use multiple measures to assess students’ college readiness, which SJR State views as a positive change. Prior to the comprehensive academic orientation, advisors now create an initial placement packet for each student. The packets provide a holistic assessment of each student’s level of college preparedness and include a number of student records and achievements, such as high school transcripts, accelerated courses, ACT and SAT scores, and career interest inventories. Counseling secretaries also interview students to get more background information to gain insight about their college and career aspirations. All of this information is compiled in the initial placement packet, which advisors use to make initial placement recommendations in the counseling system prior to orientation. However, as the head of counseling and advising noted, the college often doesn’t have access to multiple measures, including students’ transcripts. “The downside is that [advisors] don’t always have all those tools in front of us until the second semester, so for initial placement purposes, we still have some reliance on the initial placement tests.” As a result, advisors invite and encourage all students to take the PERT test.

Though SJR State implemented their comprehensive academic orientation prior to 1720, the content has been expanded to include the materials required by the bill. Advisors lead 20-24 students through a two-hour orientation that simulates a college course. This approach is tied to the college’s philosophy that “advising is teaching.” Students receive a comprehensive syllabus with clearly articulated learning outcomes, such as definitions of exempt and non-exempt populations and introductions to campus resources such as financial aid, student success workshops, and online tools for tutoring (Smarthinking), and career searching (Career Coach). Students receive their initial placement recommendations along with national and college-specific data regarding success rates in the gateway courses and their relationship to college completion. Both exempt and non-exempt students are required to sign a statement of responsibility stating that they understand that their enrollment choices may affect their academic success. In the two-hour orientation, students also choose a meta-major, select their first two semesters of coursework, and develop preliminary academic maps utilizing the state’s web-based advising system, provided through the Florida Virtual Campus, to determine the courses they will need for their academic or transfer-specific pathway.

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION MODALITIES

SJR State described the placement process prior to Senate Bill 1720 as rigid; the college did not have much flexibility with student placement or the content within the courses. Based on a student's test score, he or she was placed into one of the three-credit sequential developmental education courses by subject. The course competencies were determined by the state, and course content was developed through a collaborative process involving subject matter specialists and academic officers. In order to enter credit-bearing coursework, students had to pass a prescribed exit test at the end of the course sequence. If they did not make the minimum cut score—regardless of their previous performance, participation, or other considerations—students received a “D” for the course, which effectively meant they would have to repeat the course.

SB 1720 prompted the college to redesign its developmental offerings to move students more quickly into credit-bearing courses. SJR State made a concerted effort to develop a developmental education course structure that would allow all students to move into credit-bearing courses after a single semester if they are successful in the developmental education course. The college eliminated the two-course, three-credit developmental education sequences in math,
reading, and writing and created three new courses for each subject: a four-credit compressed class for the lowest-level students, a one-credit co-requisite course for students who are close to college ready, and a two-credit intermediate course that could be standalone or co-requisite with the gateway course. Faculty teams determined the content for the one- and two-credit courses based on topics students had the most difficulty with in the respective subjects.

The math and communications departments also developed early assessment diagnostic tests that are administered in the first two weeks of the gateway math and English courses. During the third week of class, the instructor provides students individual feedback on their results and, if necessary, recommends they co-enroll in one of the developmental education courses to supplement their instruction throughout the semester. A senior advisor explained that he advises struggling students, “If you take MAT 0055 concurrently with 1033, intermediate algebra, then you have a tutorial class that’s wrapped around you like a personal floatation device. It keeps your head above ‘C’ level [a passing grade].”

Initially, SJR State decided to offer a late-start option for all co-requisite courses to maximize the number of students in each course. Though there is a cost associated with additional developmental credits, students expected to receive a disbursement check are permitted to use those funds toward the courses, and minimal additional instructional materials are associated with the co-requisite courses. Starting fall 2015, all one- and two-credit co-requisite courses in math, reading, and writing will begin with the delayed start. Developmental courses will start September 14, which allows all students in the math and English gateway courses four weeks to assess their comfort levels with the content.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As expected, the implementation of Senate Bill 1720 caused a drop in overall developmental education enrollment. Only 221 of SJR State’s 1182 exempt students in fall 2014 enrolled in developmental courses. By contrast, prior to SB 1720, about 40 percent of recent high school graduates enrolling in the college placed into developmental math. In fall 2013, math and reading developmental education enrollment dropped by 36 and 32 percent respectively, with a large number of the remaining students co-enrolling in the gateway course. Developmental writing saw a slight increase in enrollment because 101 students enrolled in the co-requisite courses.

There were mixed results in the success rates of both the developmental and gateway courses following the redesign. In math, the overall success rates in developmental courses dropped 9 percentage points between fall 2013 and fall 2014. Overall success rates for developmental reading and writing increased 5 and 9 percentage points respectively. In intermediate algebra, there was a 16 percentage point increase in enrollment between fall 2013 and 2014 and a 6 percentage point decrease in students who successfully passed the course. ENC 1101 saw a 17 percentage point increase in enrollment and a 7 percentage point decrease in the overall student success rate during the same period. Administrators pointed out that some of the decline in student success rates may be attributed to significant curriculum changes in the math and English gateway courses that were made around the same time. For example, the faculty made a number of changes to intermediate algebra in fall 2014, including implementing a mandatory final exam that was worth a certain percentage of the grade. The college’s head of institutional effectiveness explained: “So when I’m looking at fall 2013 to fall 2014, yes the percentage of our success in our gateway course fell quite a bit, but I’m not sure how much it could be contributed to [SB 1720].” Of the students who were advised to take developmental math and chose to go directly into the gateway courses or co-enroll in the one-credit module, about 50 percent were successful in intermediate math, slightly lower than the overall success rate. In reading and writing, 63 percent of students were successful in English Comp I, which is 13 percentage points lower than the overall success rate for the course.

GOING FORWARD

SJR State described several challenges associated with the redesign, including issues around timing, resources, data, and anxiety among faculty. In addition, the growing number of developmental courses offered throughout the state poses issues when students transfer in and out of institutions. Despite these challenges, SJR State faculty and students seem to be embracing the developmental education redesign. The college’s vice president of
student affairs explained that, without the bill, SJR State would not be where it is now. “When I looked at the data for what we had been doing for the past 10 years, well that wasn’t working great. [...] We knew we needed to change. [...] We decided to do something totally different … and give it a shot.” The one- and two-credit courses have received universally positive reviews, while faculty report that students with very low skills often struggle to keep up with the four-credit compressed course. The developmental education redesign team will reconvene in September 2015 to discuss the data and experiences from the first year of implementation and consider additional changes or mid-course corrections—such as the decision to start all co-requisite courses late—that may be needed not only to expedite students’ enrollment into the credit-bearing courses but also to ensure that students have the proper structure and supports they need to be successful in the gateway courses.

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