

An ACHIEVING THE DREAM Policy Brief

# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE CUT SCORE

REDESIGNING PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT  
POLICY TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

By Michael Lawrence Collins

JULY 2008



**ACHIEVING THE DREAM: COMMUNITY COLLEGES COUNT** is a national initiative to help more community college students succeed (earn degrees, earn certificates, or transfer to other institutions to continue their studies). The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that have faced the most significant barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color. Achieving the Dream focuses colleges and others on understanding and making better use of data. It acts on multiple fronts, including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement, and public policy. *Achieving the Dream* is funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and 18 other partner foundations.

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# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE CUT SCORE

## REDESIGNING PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT POLICY TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Placement assessment policy—governing how colleges assess the academic skills of entering students and place them in courses that are appropriate for their skill levels—can be an important lever for increasing student success in community colleges. A coherent placement assessment policy would indicate which students must be assessed, specify assessment instruments, set cut score standards, and articulate the protocols and procedures to be used uniformly across a state’s community college systems. Well-designed placement assessment policies can help increase student success in a number of ways: by accurately assessing student skills and placing students in the courses they need; by ensuring consistent standards from college to college; and by providing comparable and timely data on student outcomes that states and institutions can use to inform their practices and policies.

Placement assessment policies can also help improve the college readiness of incoming students—an explicit goal in many states—by setting clear college-level performance expectations, and then communicating those expectations so that students arrive ready for college-level work.

With these benefits in mind, many states are evaluating their placement assessment policies, or lack thereof. As

they do, they are finding that setting placement assessment policy is not a simple process. This brief describes the experiences of three states in the national initiative *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* as they revised their placement assessment policies. When the Virginia Community College System set out to establish common cut scores, it unknowingly embarked upon a process that quickly made cut scores secondary to standardizing placement processes and procedures. In Connecticut, questions about cut scores quickly led to much larger questions about quality and costs. And the North Carolina Community College System finds itself continually adapting and revisiting a process that began in the 1980s. The stories of Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina in setting placement assessment policy, as well as the current policies of all *Achieving the Dream* states, suggest lessons for other states.

Additional research is needed to understand the impact of common placement standards on success outcomes, and there are many good reasons for embarking on this analysis. The brief concludes with recommendations— informed by the experience of *Achieving the Dream* and other states—that can help states develop optimal placement policies from the perspective of improving community college student outcomes.

### Achieving the Dream State Placement Assessment Policies

Placement Policy Options	Yes	No
Are students required to take placement tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, SC, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, WA
Does the state require specific tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Does the state specify which students are exempt?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Is there a common statewide placement cut score?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Are students required to enroll in or complete developmental education within a specified time period?	AR, FL, OK	CT, HI, MA, MI, NC, NM, OH, PA, SC, TX, VA, WA



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### UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY TRADE-OFFS

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Aspirations for college are at an all-time high as people realize that most jobs now and in the coming decades will require some form of education beyond the high school diploma. But many high school graduates, returning students, and adult learners seeking higher education credentials lack the academic skills to enter college-level classes directly. This academic skills gap is dramatically apparent in our nation's community colleges. Across the nation, 42 percent of first-year students at community colleges took at least one developmental education course in 2000 (Parsad & Lewis 2003). Students who arrive unprepared face more courses, longer times to a degree, higher costs, and, far too often, less success in meeting their goals. The colleges serving these students face the challenges of staffing developmental education courses and the associated cost, and attrition issues arise as students fall short of their aspirations. These challenges have drawn increased attention to state-level developmental education policies, with a particular and growing emphasis on policies governing how students are assessed and placed in developmental education.

These challenges are a central concern of *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count*, a multiyear, national initiative designed to help more community college students succeed—complete courses, earn certificates, and earn degrees. The initiative is built on the belief that broad institutional change—informed by student achievement data—is critical to achieving this result. The program, which started in 2004 with funding from Lumina Foundation for Education, works in 83 colleges across 15 states, and much of the work is designed to help students succeed in developmental education,

and then to go on to credit-bearing courses and to earn credentials and degrees. In the policy strand of the initiative, teams in each state work on policy changes that can support the colleges' efforts, and they seek to spread successful institutional practices from participating colleges across the states. The state teams have concluded that aligning community college placement expectations, standards, and assessments is a key way that policy can reduce the number of students requiring developmental education.

While all *Achieving the Dream* states face similar challenges in this area, they have approached developmental education policies differently. Some states have taken a centralized approach and developed common statewide placement policies; others have left those to individual colleges.

In 2005, *Standardization vs. Flexibility: State Policy Options on Placement Testing for Developmental Education in Community Colleges*, a policy brief from Jobs for the Future, described the trade-offs and options states face in determining their developmental education policies (Prince 2005). At that time, only five states were participating in *Achieving the Dream*—Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—and only two had developed statewide placement policies that included a common set of cut scores for placing students in developmental education. Much has changed since 2005. Today, ten additional states—Arkansas, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington—have joined the initiative, and all 15 *Achieving the Dream* states are examining the impact of their developmental education policies on student outcomes.

*It's Not About the Cut Score* takes an updated and detailed look at the choices made in *Achieving the Dream* states regarding placement assessment policies. It provides an insider's view of how state placement policy deliberations have played out on the ground in three states. Interviews with decision makers in Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina bring to life the trials and tribulations—and triumphs—involved in implementing common placement policies. The Resource Section (Appendix A) examines the extent of variation within and between states on key policy questions, describes the range of placement cut score policies in each state, and discusses the implications of this variability on student success outcomes.

The brief also discusses the lessons learned and recommendations generated by *Achieving the Dream* state policy teams. One of the most important conclusions is that while setting common cut scores might be the initial goal,

it is rarely the ultimate focus of the work. Underlying questions about broader placement assessment policy—ranging from how to pay faculty needed to teach developmental courses, to whether students can use calculators while taking placement exams—often rise to front and center. The state teams also learned that this work is never done: it is an iterative process that requires vigilant and continual monitoring and refining. But they feel strongly that they have embarked upon a necessary process that has sparked critical conversations, pulled back the covers on unseen data and unquestioned assumptions, provided a rational framework for decision making, and resulted in useful changes. These lessons and recommendations should be instructive to states seeking to better understand the trade-offs between statewide common placement policies and more flexible, institution-set placement policies.

## OVERVIEW OF STATE PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT POLICY PATTERNS

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Across the nation, 27 states have policies that require community colleges to assess entering students' needs for developmental education, and placement assessment policies appear to be a growing trend (*see Table 1*).<sup>1</sup> Since JFF published *Standardization vs. Flexibility* in 2005, six more states nationwide report having mandatory placement assessment policies (Prince 2005). Similarly, the number of states that require colleges to use a specific placement test almost doubled between 2002 and 2008, reaching 21 states. Finally, and most dramatically, the number of states requiring standardized cut scores for placement into developmental education more than tripled during this period.

Of the 46 states that provided information in 2008:

- 27 states (up from 21 states in 2002) reported that a state-level policy was in place requiring community colleges to assess students' needs for developmental education at the time of enrollment.

- 21 states (up from 11 states in 2002) specified one or more approved placement exams for colleges to use. COMPASS was the most frequently approved exam (14 states), followed by ACCUPLACER (11 states) and ASSET (7 states).
- 19 states (up from 5 states in 2002) required colleges to use standardized cut scores or ranges on these exams for placement into developmental education.

Policy developments in the *Achieving the Dream* states reflect this national trend toward standardization. At the start of the initiative, only Florida and Texas had official statewide common placement policies. A third state, Virginia, had an unofficial cut score policy that its colleges generally followed. However, since 2005, each of the original *Achieving the Dream* states has reviewed or is in the process of reviewing its placement assessment policies, with an emphasis—for now, at least—on cut score policies. New Mexico has collected and posted a cut score data matrix for review. North



Carolina has completed an ACCUPLACER validation study and set statewide cut scores. Texas is reviewing its cut score policy to determine if it should be revised. Among the ten states that have subsequently joined the initiative, five have common placement policies, with Connecticut and Hawaii setting their policies since this research began. (For a detailed look at place-

ment policies in the *Achieving the Dream* states, see Appendix A.)

The individual and collective experiences of the *Achieving the Dream* states provide insight into the rationale for this trend toward standardization, and lessons for states considering similar policy options.

**Table 1: State Policies on Developmental Education Assessment and Placement, 2008**

	Requires Developmental Education Assessment	Specifies Placement Exam(s)	Sets Standard Cut Score or Range	Exams Specified			
				ACCUPLACER	COMPASS	ASSET	Other
Alabama	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Arkansas	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Colorado	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Connecticut	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Florida	✓	✓	✓				✓
Georgia	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Hawaii	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Kentucky	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Louisiana	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Maryland <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Massachusetts	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	✓			
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ohio	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Tennessee	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Texas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vermont	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Virginia <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
West Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Montana <sup>1, 2</sup>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
New Jersey <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓		✓			
Arizona	✓						
California <sup>1</sup>	✓						
Illinois <sup>1</sup>	✓						
Nevada	✓						
Oklahoma	✓						
South Carolina	✓						
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>

**States reporting no assessment policies (19):** Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming

**States not reporting (4):** Nebraska, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah

<sup>1</sup> = Placement mandated; assessment treated as advisory

<sup>2</sup> = No state policy in place, but colleges have formally agreed to common standards

Shading = *Achieving the Dream* states

## PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

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There are many compelling reasons for more states to revise their placement assessment policies and practices, including the setting or modifying of cut scores. The pressures for change come from both inside and outside of community college systems.

The powerful interaction between the internal and external pressures has pressed a number of states, including many *Achieving the Dream* states, into corralling disparate placement practices and policies into a coherent placement assessment policy framework. This includes specifying assessment instruments, cut score standards, and protocols and procedures to be used uniformly across the systems.

### Internal Pressures for Change

*Alarming low student success rates:* These have compelled many community college systems to put all of their policies and practices under the microscope, looking for a relationship between placement policies and student success. For example, if cut scores are set too low, students may be placed in courses for which they are underprepared. If cut scores are set too high, students may spend time and tuition money on developmental education courses when they could instead be progressing through credit-bearing, college-level courses.

*Inconsistent entrance standards:* Community college systems feel pressure to ensure that entrance standards are consistent among colleges, thereby clarifying student expectations and eliminating confusion. Standardizing placement scores eliminates the chance that students earning the same score on placement exams are deemed college ready in some of the system's colleges but are required to enroll in developmental education in others. In states with large numbers of community colleges, campuses within a few miles of each other can have different cut scores, allowing students who test into developmental education at one college to effectively game the system by enrolling in a second college where their score qualifies them as college-ready.

*Barriers to facilitating transfer:* Community college systems wish to better facilitate transfer by avoiding the scenario in which students with college-ready status transfer to another college in the same system and are there required to enroll in developmental education under different placement criteria.

*Inconsistent data:* Some community college systems are seeking comparable data from all colleges in order to measure the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase student success. For example, if a system wants to analyze the graduation rates of students who begin in developmental education, the standards for who enrolls in developmental education need to be the same at each college.

*Unclear course sequences:* New research suggests that taking courses in the appropriate sequence, and within a reasonable time frame, matters (for example, taking Math 11 soon after taking Math 10 generally leads to better outcomes). As a result, states may want to encourage community college systems to consider how to ensure that students enroll in the right courses at the right time. Historically, the open access mission has made many community colleges reluctant to require students to take developmental education, or to take courses in a certain order or at a certain time, but some colleges and systems are starting to embrace student *success*—in addition to access—as their mission (Adelman 2006; Bashford & Slater 2008; Prince 2005; Shulock & Moore 2007).

### External Pressures for Change

*Limited alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education:* The greatest external pressures to develop common placement standards come from K-12 reform efforts and the national push to align secondary and postsecondary standards. The disconnect between the skills of high school graduates and the skills needed for college and workplace success has compelled many states to work on aligning their high

school exit standards with college entrance standards. For a number of these states, particularly those participating in the American Diploma Project, there is an effort to have high school exit requirements and college entrance requirements be one and the same.<sup>2</sup> Much of the focus on the high school graduation and college entrance transition has come from reform efforts in K-12, but community colleges have also had to respond with regard to college readiness standards. The first step for many community colleges is identifying placement test cut scores that high school students must achieve to be enrolled in college-level courses. As these deliberations continue, states that have not identified common placement policies for students enrolling in community college systems will be under increasing pressure to do so.

*Academic quality standards across higher education:* Four-year higher education institutions seeking to improve transfer from two-year institutions would like robust indicators of quality. Transfer negotiations often get stuck on

questions about the academic quality of community college courses offered for transfer. Without specific thresholds for content mastery that all students must meet, it is difficult to verify the quality and acceptability of transfer courses. If common cut scores are set high enough, community colleges can provide assurance that the required academic thresholds have been met to facilitate smoother transfer, and this can minimize course duplication for community college students transferring to four-year institutions.

*Policymakers' concerns:* Many policymakers, including state legislators, are alarmed at the number of college students in need of remediation. The cost of remediation has long sparked legislative interest in the effectiveness of developmental education, including placement policies and cut score standards. In Connecticut and North Carolina, two states profiled in the next section, the ultimate push to establish common placement cut scores was a legislative mandate.

## **POLITICAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS IN SETTING PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT POLICY: Three State Rationales for, and Experiences with, Standardizing Placement Cut Scores**

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The collective experience of *Achieving the Dream* states suggests that placement assessment policy can be an important lever for increasing student success in community college. Developing clear, accurate, and high-performance standards that are consistent from college to college, and communicating those standards to potential students and high schools, could help to increase the number of students who enter community college with the academic skills needed for success in entry-level classes. Therefore, systematizing placement assessment policies, as by standardizing cut scores, is an important step in increasing community colleges' capacity to increase student success. Student outcomes could be dramatically improved by increasing the accuracy of student placement, ensuring the effective instructional

delivery of developmental education, and establishing strong performance measurement systems that provide timely information institutions can use to inform their practices and policies. However, states wishing to take this step have many options and face trade-offs.

In early 2008, JFF interviewed decision makers in Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina to learn their experiences with setting common cut scores, a first step in addressing their broader placement policies. The strategies of these three *Achieving the Dream* states provide important lessons for states considering how to systematize their placement policies or whether to protect institutional flexibility. These accounts may resonate with states that have navigated similar waters, and they will be particularly

useful to states that are beginning to explore setting placement assessment policies, including common cut score policies.

In particular, the examples illustrate how cut score policies play out on the ground at varying stages of development. Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina chose to set common placement cut scores for similar reasons, but each state is in a different phase of policy analysis and development. In addition, each faced specific pressure points that made their trajectories toward common placement standards unique. The differences in their stories illustrate the benefits, challenges, and trade-offs that must be considered when setting placement assessment policy.

*Virginia* is reviewing its placement cut scores policy. Virginia's experience centers on getting smarter about the impact of placement cut score policy on student success. The commonwealth is reviewing its policy in part because its participation in *Achieving the Dream* has intensified scrutiny of how policy decisions affect student outcomes. But Virginia's experience also illustrates unintended consequences. The review of placement cut score policy has turned out to focus less on the specific scores than anticipated and more on overall policies governing placement and assessment.

*Connecticut* is implementing statewide cut scores mandated by the legislature in January 2007. Connecticut's experience is about the potential impact on institutions of setting common scores, and how states may need to anticipate likely changes—in faculty and staff allocation, facilities, and funding.

*North Carolina* is in the second year of implementing a common cut score policy mandated by the General Assembly in August 2006. North Carolina's experience illustrates the iterative nature of setting common cut scores and some of the challenges faced when providing open access while at the same time maintaining high standards.

## Virginia: The Process Matters as Much as the Policy

*Seeking to firm up the range in its placement cut scores, the Virginia Community College System finds that it must first better define underlying placement processes. The following description of Virginia's experience with developing its placement assessment policy is based on an interview with Monty Sullivan, Vice Chancellor for Academic Services & Research with the Virginia Community College System.*

### Background

Historically, most Virginia community colleges have charted their own courses when it came to assessing student readiness. The placement tests and cut scores they used, in the words of Monty Sullivan, “varied across the board.” But in the early 1990s, in collaboration with the American College Testing organization, the Virginia Community College System took steps to align its placement and assessment policies. VCCS instructed its colleges to use a specific “decision zone,” or cutoff score range on the ACT COMPASS exam, to place students into either college-level or developmental education courses. Even though no statute or written system policy required compliance, few colleges strayed from the system's guidance. By and large the policy appeared to work.

Sullivan and his colleagues, influenced in part by participation in *Achieving the Dream*, began to ask questions about this policy's impact on student outcomes: Should COMPASS be the only assessment? Would tightening the decision zone increase student success? In 2006, an informal survey of the colleges' placement practices raised even more questions, as Sullivan told us:

*We found . . . that institutions with high numbers of dual enrollment students and those with high numbers of ESL students chose to use a variety of instruments in addition to ACT COMPASS. The instrument didn't provide the flexibility that they needed. And it caused us to ask questions: Why is this? Is it because of the assessment itself? It caused us [the system] to dig a little deeper.*

## **Studies and a Task Force**

In January 2007, VCCS began a series of research studies designed to better understand its placement policy's impact on student success. The initial research, funded by the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices, was completed in August 2007. It focused on pinpointing the academic weaknesses of recent high school graduates and identifying colleges' strategies to serve students who enroll needing developmental education. The next month, VCCS's Academic Services and Research Department followed up the academic weaknesses research with a related longitudinal study that tracked success outcomes by placement scores. Both studies raised a host of questions that called for further longitudinal study, and both recommended that an internal study be conducted to reexamine Virginia's use of COMPASS, its cutoff scores, subsequent course placements, and student success in these courses.

To get the colleges' perspective on the issue, VCCS appointed a placement task force and prepared for a protracted debate on the COMPASS assessment and cutoff scores. However, there was almost instant consensus—but with a twist. While the taskforce agreed that determining the right assessments and the most accurate cut score range was important, a more pressing matter needed to be handled first. As Sullivan notes, a cut score range means little when the placement tests are administered inconsistently; inconsistent administration will lead to wide variations in student scores.

*The colleges' placement processes and procedures were all over the board. Some institutions required students to take the placement test on campus, while others allowed students to take the test on line. Some colleges allowed calculators on math tests; others did not. Some institutions allowed retests within a short amount of time, while others did not allow retests. Some institutions required an essay to augment the COMPASS assessment; others did not. And some institutions allowed SAT and ACT scores for placement purposes; while others did not.*

At the beginning of this process, the system's top priority was gathering empirical evidence for revising its cut score policy. However, the task force findings have shifted the approach to broader placement assessment policy.

*The cut score study itself is somewhat secondary at this point in the process. It was primary in the early stages, but it became much more secondary as we began to think about that we had so many differences in the way our colleges managed the procedures of placement testing that it's very difficult to compare numbers across colleges when there are such huge differences. There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of studying the cut scores, but until we have that solid procedure in place and everyone understands that we're operating from the same sheet of music, I think our labor in studying cut scores was for naught.*

## **The Road Ahead**

The task force's early consensus to develop common procedures for placement, rather than immediately grappling with which assessments or cutoff scores will be used to place students, has expedited the discussion. Nevertheless, the arduous tasks of building consensus on the specific assessments that will be used and specific cutoff scores for math and English lie ahead.

In addition to carefully navigating the perennial "quality vs. access" debate, which historically has been part of placement policy deliberations, particularly on cut scores, VCCS must also team up with the K-12 sector.<sup>3</sup> Virginia, in collaboration with the American Diploma Project, is



aligning its high school exit standards with its college entrance standards, with the ultimate goal of creating a high school diploma that reflects college preparatory-level work and can play a role in college placement. This alignment represents an enormous step in the right direction, but it also presents new challenges. Sullivan reflects:

*As we talk about possible revisions to our placement policies, there have been discussions among people from Department of Education, the P-16 Council, and the American Diploma Project that want to explore using the high school diploma for college placement purposes. We don't have a formal position on this at this time, but we've said from the beginning that it's important [that] any future standard go beyond indicating "passing or failure" and truly indicate readiness for success in college.*

VCCS is moving ahead and expects that it will need to address the specific issue of placement cut scores in the fall of 2008. By then, all of the colleges will be using the same processes and procedures to assess students, and the system will be able to use data to make “apple-to-apple” comparisons of placement, cut scores, and student outcomes. Sullivan expects that VCCS will have a much better sense of what the cut score data mean as a result of understanding how the cut scores are derived from campus to campus. He and his colleagues believe they are building a foundation of evidence that will allow the system to eventually set a placement cut score range with greater accuracy.

Sullivan believes the system's shift in its approach to placement assessment policy, particularly on cut scores, will pay big returns in the end, and that the timing is right for the conversation.

*In some ways our vice presidents have been primed for this conversation. Through participating in Achieving the Dream, they understand the importance of common definitions and standards and the importance of being able to make meaningful comparisons across campuses.*

## Connecticut: A Whisper Grows Louder

*After hearing presentations on developmental education, transfer, and the effective use of data at an Achieving the Dream meeting in January 2007, a key staffer from the Connecticut Department of Education whispered to a senior staffer at the Connecticut Community College System that their state would benefit from developing common placement cut scores. In the next legislative session, the Department of Education facilitated the sponsorship and eventual passage of a bill mandating the system to identify common cut scores. The following description of placement assessment policy developments is based on an interview with Paul Susen, Chief Academic Officer with the Connecticut Community College System.*

### Pressures to Standardize

The issue of implementing common placement cut scores is not new to Connecticut. In 1986, when the Connecticut Community College System (CCCS) was using a precursor of ACCUPLACER known as the New Jersey Basic Skills Test, the faculty tried to agree on a common cut score. That attempt, and many since then, got mired in the painful political process of setting standards.

In 2007, however, agreeing on common cut scores became a top priority for the CCCS for three primary reasons. Two years earlier, Connecticut had become an *Achieving the Dream* state and intensified its focus on using data to inform policymaking. However, a lack of comparable data across colleges prevented the CCCS from measuring the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase student success. A key obstacle was the variability of placement practices, including testing protocols and cut score ranges—revealed by a study of the ways colleges used ACCUPLACER.

Differences in placement cut scores across community colleges in the system also strained the CCCS's relationships with both the University of Connecticut and Connecticut State University System. Without robust indicators of the rigor and quality of the community college transfer core, assuaging the universities'

concerns about transfer students' academic readiness was difficult. It was clear that an important step in building the universities' confidence was developing common cut scores. As Paul Susen notes:

*We need to be assuring the university that our basic gatekeeper courses are consistent in their content and rigor. We couldn't do that with gatekeeper courses across the system having different placement criteria to enter, particularly if your cut scores are 40 percent different entering into that course.*

The third and arguably most compelling reason that cut scores became a top priority was a legislative mandate. In 2007, Special Act 07-7 required "a report on the establishment of placement scores for the Community-Technical College System and the Connecticut State University System that establish specific proficiency levels for all matriculated students entering college level courses." The General Assembly required that cut scores be established within six months, a startlingly short timeline given the faculty's inability to agree on cut scores after more than twenty years of discussions.

### **Setting the Score**

Despite what initially seemed an unreachable deadline, the faculty agreed on statewide placement cut scores. The fact that Connecticut had a strong faculty leadership structure in place made all the difference. The process to set the cut scores was led by the mathematics and English committees, comprised of faculty members and led by respected academic deans. Susen described some of the reasons for their success:

*The committee members have worked together; they know each other, and most importantly, they respect each other and are highly regarded by their peers. They've collaborated professionally and they've gotten together socially. But it still took a lot of compromise. No one got exactly what they wanted. But I think we were fairly successful, even though no one was entirely comfortable with the outcome. Everybody had to move off the dime.*

As the committees began to review placement policies and procedures, it became clear that the real issue was broader than cut scores.

*We concluded that we were looking at cut scores because we thought it was important to look at cut scores, but we were missing the forest for the trees—we didn't have good alignment [between, for example, developmental education and gatekeeper courses]. We really needed to go backward and look at the gatekeeper courses, then go backward to developmental education.*

In addition to alignment, other complex policy decisions had to be made in light of the new cut score policy. These included: which students colleges would have to assess; protocols for returning students designated as college ready under the previous policy; protocols for the use of calculators; and protocols for retesting.

### **The Impact**

In addition to these challenges, the setting of common cut scores had major fiscal implications. The colleges' budgets are automatically adjusted for their enrollment mix. As Connecticut funds developmental education at a higher rate than some college-level courses, a dramatic increase in the number of students entering developmental education could significantly increase the costs to the state:

*We ran the projections using the newly proposed cut score and found that some colleges would need to add up to 10 additional sections of developmental education.*

Changes in the numbers of students needing developmental education would also have staffing implications. In some cases, faculty who were teaching college-level courses would need to teach developmental education. For some faculty, this change would represent, Susen notes, "a pedagogical, personal, and cultural mismatch." While professional development could smooth the transition in some instances, difficult staffing decisions would be inevitable.

The system also projected major implications for professional support staff. To help students reach the higher standards, the CCCS would need to dramatically decrease the ratio of students to professional counselors and increase the number of tutors and other support services for struggling students.

*When you are confronted with huge numbers of students, and you don't have enough staff to help them, it's hard to help those students be successful.*

### **The Work Ahead: Setting the Score, Then Settling the Bill**

There are still kinks to work out and decisions to make with regard to placement cut score protocols, but for many the looming question is simple: who pays for all of this? Setting the initial cut score is only the first step in a long-term process of calibrating placement cut scores at a point that maximizes student success. The CCCS will be monitoring student success at the current cut scores to inform future adjustments. Additionally, the CCCS does not expect its colleges to simply squeeze more from their budgets to serve more developmental education students; the system will make the case to the General Assembly for additional resources to address the fiscal impact of common cut scores.

This is a tricky proposition: it will likely draw attention to the number of students in need of developmental education. While this may not be an easy conversation to have, Susen says that CCCS officials believe that it is the right conversation:

*In the end cut scores will have risen, community college standards will have risen, and it will be easier for students to transfer because the four-years will have more confidence in the content and rigor of gatekeeper courses.*

## **North Carolina: A Process of Continuous Calibration**

*In fall 2007, North Carolina community colleges began assessing college-readiness proficiency under the system's uniform placement policy, seemingly concluding a process that began in 1993 with a mandate from the General Assembly. The process does not end with the establishment of statewide placement cut scores, however. Instead, it is iterative as North Carolina seeks to set a placement cut score that maximizes student success through continuous adaptation and refinement. The following description of North Carolina's experience setting common placement standards is based on an interview with Marc Williams, Coordinator of Counseling Services at Guilford Technical Community College and former chair of the statewide placement committee.*

### **Background**

Before the mid-1980s, the placement policies for North Carolina community colleges were, in the words of Marc Williams, “hit or miss.” Colleges used departmental exams and other homegrown tests to place students, none of which were nationally normed. Complicating matters further, the colleges—in some cases within close proximity of one another—offered different levels of developmental education. Williams gives a good sense of the complexity:

*There may have been 50 different English courses being taught, and 50 different numbers and even here at Guilford Tech, we were operating on three levels, offering an English for vocational students, an English for technical students, and an English for college transfer students. And there's a lot of moving from college to college. Right here in Jamestown, there are five other colleges within 30 to 40 minutes of each other.*

By the 1990s, the colleges' relationships with one another were changing from an association of relatively autonomous institutions into a comprehensive system offering transfer. When this combined with a move to the semester system and standardized curricula across the state, pressure increased to standardize placement policies. In 1993 the North Carolina General Assembly mandated that the State Board for Community Colleges study which



placement tests and cut scores should be used as standards to determine college readiness and to report findings to the General Assembly in May 1994.

As a first step, the board appointed a statewide placement committee to guide the state's efforts. One of its first actions was to survey colleges to find out their placement assessment practices and policies. In 1997, the survey was followed by a cut score validation study conducted by national testing companies, including the Educational Testing Service, ACT, and the College Board. This effort culminated in October 1999 with a statewide policy requiring colleges to use cut scores at about the 50th percentile on ACCUPLACER.

Symptomatic of the entire process, that policy was continuously revisited and tweaked. For example, the colleges were required to submit cut score-related outcome data for fall 2001-03 to ACT, which would validate the cut scores. However, as Williams describes, and again indicative of the challenges inherent in setting placement policies, particularly cut score policies, there were hurdles in collecting the data.

*We didn't really have the data needed to make the first recommendation in 1999. We finally got around to doing the studies using actual grades of students. We tried to collect as much data as possible, including providing course grades for students for a four-semester period to get a large group. Since colleges were doing things differently as far as cut scores, there was a little variation in the data. We had a bit of trouble getting the grade data to the testing organizations. As a matter of fact, we had to do it three times before we got it right.*

Luckily, the third time's the charm and ACT completed the validation study in February 2005. The placement committee met in April to evaluate the validation study outcomes and make recommendations using the cut scores established in 1999 as a springboard. The validation study data were critical, but the placement committee also concluded that, in Williams's words, "setting cut scores is not purely scientific—political, social, philosophical

and fiscal issues" are at play. For the committee, the core of the cut score issue was embodied in the following questions:

*At what point along the continuum of cut scores is the greatest number of students who are prepared for college-level work placed in college-level courses? And, at what point along the continuum are students who are not prepared to be successful in college-level work without remediation placed in developmental education?*

The placement committee took the position that it was the best use of student and faculty time and state resources to move the maximum number of students capable of college-level work into college-level courses. The committee's practical approach to erring on the side of inclusion was met with resistance from some faculty groups and from some colleges that argued that they were focused on excellence even if it resulted in more students needing remediation. Some were particularly alienated by the placement committee's rationale for where to set the cut score:

*Our guiding principle was that we should identify the point where students can reasonably be successful and not incur the cost of remediation if it's not needed. . . . [L]ooking at what the data said . . . if any of the scores could be lower and we could keep the same . . . probability of success with students, then we saw no reason not to lower the score because . . . [getting as many students who are capable of college-level work into college-level courses is] the best use of our taxpayers' money, and the best use of our students' and our faculty's time.*

In the end, the placement committee maintained that its goal was placing as many students as possible in college-level courses, while simultaneously ensuring that students who could not succeed without developmental education received the support they needed. Somewhat ironically, they ultimately recommended cut scores that were similar to those set in 1999. To vet the committee's recommendations, they

were posted to the Web site of the North Carolina Community College System and reviewed by instructional administrators, student services administrators, the Presidents' Association, and others. Finally, the Presidents' Association voted, and the result was that most colleges would use the COMPASS and ASSET placement tests, as well as the existing cut scores established in 1999, while colleges using ACCU-PLACER would adjust their cut scores for the math section.

### **Next Steps: Continuing to Refine and Calibrate**

In August 2006, the State Board of Community Colleges adopted the new, standardized placement policy. Although the policy made few changes in terms of cut scores, it established a new committee charged with monitoring the impact of the scores. The committee will work with the testing companies to conduct validation studies every three years, and it will advise the state board on revisions as needed.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Additional research is needed to understand the impact of common placement standards on success outcomes, but as this brief has discussed, there are many good reasons for embarking on this process. For example, clear and coherent placement policies can help ensure that colleges assess and place all students as accurately as possible, thereby decreasing the incidence of students failing to receive the developmental education intervention they need. Clear standards that are common across colleges also make it easier for states to compare the rates at which students progress through developmental education. This analysis improves the ability of states to benchmark performance and identify best practices to replicate and scale statewide. Clear placement policies can translate into clear expectations about the skills that high school graduates will need to succeed in college, and common practices will reduce confusion among entering students who want to understand their options. Common placement assessment policies will also signal to four-year institutions that there is consistency among community colleges, thereby facilitating transfer.

The following recommendations—informed by lessons learned by, and best practices in, *Achieving the Dream* states and other states—describe what states can do to develop an optimal placement policy environment from the perspective of improving student outcomes in community colleges.

### **Rigorously examine the impact of existing placement policies on student success.**

The first step in developing common placement policies in Virginia, Connecticut, and North Carolina was to understand current placement practices throughout the system. The systems profiled here learned of campus practices through internal surveys and by commissioning national testing companies to perform cut score validation studies. After reviewing the extent of variation in practices and policies, states moved forward, in some cases in collaboration with the testing organization and a system-level placement committee.

### **Establish common standards for success in college-level work.**

States should convene math and English faculty groups to develop a consensus on the levels of academic preparation students need to succeed in entry-level college courses. Optimally, these standards would be calibrated with high school graduation requirements and signal readiness for college and work. However, many states have yet to fully align their education systems to a college- and work-ready standard. In these, specifying the assessment instruments that can be used to place students and establishing a placement cut score standard for entry-level college work may be an interim step toward full alignment of state-level high school graduation, college entrance, and college success standards.

**Vigorously communicate college entry standards to high school students and related audiences.**

States should develop robust communications strategies to inform entering students of the standards necessary for admittance into college-level courses. Optimally, states would provide early assessment options, such as placement tests administered to high school students, to indicate if they are on track to enter college-level courses. States should consider options like California State University's Early Assessment Program, geared to high school juniors. If they are not prepared, California students have adequate time to take courses in the senior year, and the program provides on-line tutorials for students who need to raise their skills before enrolling in college.

**Enhance the capacity of data and performance measurement systems to track and analyze developmental education outcomes.**

State performance measurement and accountability systems should include indicators that capture placement cut score data, developmental education starting points, and progress rates. Performance measurement systems should disaggregate developmental education outcomes by student subgroups, including students of color, low-income students, English language learners, and non-traditional-age college students. This would provide the state with a more fine-grained picture of how students progress through developmental education. It also would allow states to differentiate policy interventions to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners. Finally, states should track outcomes over the long term and mine longitudinal data for successful strategies that could be implemented and scaled across all colleges in the state.

**Build consensus in the "quality versus access" debate.**

Each of the states featured in this brief ran up against two schools of thought during their deliberations to set common cut scores: the *academic excellence* camp and the *access* camp. Describing these two perspectives as polar

opposites certainly oversimplifies a complex debate. Nevertheless, the hyperbole captures the intensity of the divide between staunch advocates for open access and equally staunch advocates for high academic standards. Each of the states profiled here has found a balance to ensure that students with a reasonable chance of success in college-level courses are not placed in developmental education and that students unable to succeed without developmental education are appropriately placed. Better data on student outcomes can help as states consider the spectrum of arguments in the quality-versus-access debate. While both positions have merit, a cut score policy that maximizes student success is likely to fall in the middle.

**This process is not about the cut score. It is really about developing a common understanding of what college readiness means.**

Each state profiled here entered into placement policy deliberations focused on identifying a specific cut score or cut score range. In each case, the cut scores themselves—while important—were in the end peripheral to the process of defining standards that students must meet to enter college-level courses. A coherent placement assessment policy requires specifying assessment instruments, cut score standards, and protocols and procedures to be used uniformly.

Ultimately, cut scores are the by-product of a statewide process to determine the academic skills students need to begin entry-level college courses. While the discussions in each of the featured states began with cut scores, their outcomes suggest broader systemic issues. Indeed, one of the most important outcomes is the process of bringing stakeholders together to agree on academic proficiency standards for success in the first year of college.

## APPENDIX A

### RESOURCES:

#### Placement Assessment Policies in Achieving the Dream States

**Table 2: Achieving the Dream State Placement Assessment Policies**

Placement Policy Options	Yes	No
Are students required to take placement tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, SC, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, WA
Does the state require specific tests?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Does the state specify which students are exempt?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Is there a common statewide placement cut score?	AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, NC, OH, OK, TX, VA	MI, NM, PA, SC, WA
Are students required to enroll in or complete developmental education within a specified time period?	AR, FL, OK	CT, HI, MA, MI, NC, NM, OH, PA, SC, TX, VA, WA

The challenges of serving large numbers of students who need developmental education before attempting college-level courses are strikingly similar across state lines, but states have implemented a wide array of policy options for assessing and placing students in developmental education. Table 2 gives an overview of placement assessment policies in the *Achieving the Dream* states, showing a clear delineation between those states with more comprehensive placement assessment policies and those states with few policies in place.

These data are self-reported by the states and were collected from *Achieving the Dream* states by JFF via interviews and a review of statutes, administrative rules, and policy manuals in late 2007 and early 2008. See Appendix B: Methodology for further information and Appendix C: State Cut Score Charts for detailed data on cut scores by state and institution.

**Table 3: Achieving the Dream States that Require Placement Tests**

State	State-Required Placement Tests
Arkansas	COMPASS and ASSET
Connecticut	ACCUPLACER
Florida	Florida Entry-Level Placement Test (commonly referred to as College Placement Test or CPT)
Hawaii	COMPASS
Massachusetts	ACCUPLACER
North Carolina	ACCUPLACER, ASSET, COMPASS, CPT
Ohio	COMPASS
Oklahoma	ACT
Texas	ACCUPLACER, ASSET, COMPASS, THEA
Virginia	COMPASS

#### Does the state require students to take placement tests? Does the state require specific tests?

Of the 15 *Achieving the Dream* states, 11 have state-level policies in place requiring community college students to take placement tests before enrolling in college-level courses. All of those states except South Carolina require their colleges to use specific placement tests. ACCUPLACER and COMPASS are the primary placement assessment tools, but some states also use ASSET.

Florida and Texas have their own state-specific placement tests. Florida uses the College Placement Test (CPT), a computerized and customized version of ACCUPLACER. Texas allows students to be placed by the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) in addition to ACCUPLACER and COMPASS. Oklahoma is unique in using the ACT as a “first cut” assessment to determine if a student is

ready to enroll in college-level classes.

Institutions may choose a secondary assessment for students who do not pass the “first cut.”

ACCUPLACER and COMPASS are among the tests that institutions choose as a “second cut,” but institutions may use any test so long as it is a valid assessment.

### **Does the state specify which students are exempt?**

Ten states specify exemptions or methods of bypassing their placement assessment policy (Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia). The most common exemptions are for students who have earned a college-ready score on the SAT or ACT. The standard scores for SAT and ACT exemptions vary from state to state depending on college entrance standards negotiated within the state. In some cases, students must demonstrate still higher levels of proficiency to enter higher-level college courses. In Florida, for example, the colleges are not required to honor the state exemption and can require students to demonstrate additional proficiency before admitting students into college-level courses. Texas appears to have the greatest number of exemption methods, including earning a college-ready score on the Texas high school exit exam, enrolling in programs that last less than one year, demonstrating previously earned college-ready status, or being on active military duty.

### **Does the state require students to enroll in developmental education within a specific time period?**

While the majority of *Achieving the Dream* states require students to be assessed before enrolling in college-level courses, only Arkansas, Florida, and Oklahoma require students to complete developmental education courses within a specified period. Arkansas requires reading deficiencies to be remediated in the first or second semester and in each subsequent semester until met. Florida requires full-time students to begin developmental education in

their first term. Part-time students must complete developmental education within 12 semester credit hours, and students who fail to do so must remain continuously enrolled in developmental education until their remedial requirements are met. In both states students are allowed to complete their remediation while concurrently enrolled in college-level courses. In Oklahoma, students must remove deficiencies in certain subjects before taking college-credit courses in those subjects.

### **Is there a statewide common cut score?**

Ten *Achieving the Dream* states—Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia—have set statewide common cut scores. COMPASS and ACCUPLACER are the most commonly used placement assessment instruments in these states. Each of these assessments has multiple sections, and states must choose which sections will be required for placement purposes.

### **COMPASS**

COMPASS offers only one test for reading comprehension, but states must make choices for the writing and mathematics sections. For writing, states have the option of assessing sentence skills and/or essay writing. The majority of states require only the sentence skills assessment, but a number of states augment this with the essay-writing section. For mathematics, states have the option of specifying placement standards on pre-algebra, algebra, college algebra, geometry, and/or trigonometry. Most *Achieving the Dream* states only require students be assessed on the algebra portion of the mathematics assessment. The six *Achieving the Dream* states using COMPASS reported the following cut scores, which are the bottom of the range for those states reporting a range:

- **Reading:** Five states maintain cut scores between 79 and 82; Ohio is the only state with a lower cut score, at 69.
- **Writing:** Most states require a placement cut score of at least a 70 to bypass developmental education, though in Texas the threshold is lower than the other states, at 59.
- **Math-Algebra:** Cut scores vary widely. Ohio's cut score for math-algebra is the highest, at 65; Texas has the lowest, at 39. North Carolina's policy differs from the other states in that it requires the pre-algebra section of the assessment rather than algebra.

### ACCUPLACER

Like COMPASS, ACCUPLACER offers a single reading assessment, but states have choices on which writing and mathematics tests they will use. Similarly, ACCUPLACER also has two writing tests: sentence skills and written essay. Most of the states require the sentence skills test, but, as with COMPASS, a number of states augment this assessment with the written essay. In Texas, students who do not meet the cut score requirement on the sentence skills portion of the assessment may use the essay score to

demonstrate readiness for college-level courses. For the mathematics assessment, states have the option of specifying placement standards on arithmetic, elementary algebra, or college-level math. The *Achieving the Dream* states that require ACCUPLACER reported the following cut scores (these scores are the bottom of the range for those states reporting a range):

- **Reading:** Cut scores fall within a 15-point range, with a high of 83 in Connecticut and a low of 68 in Massachusetts.
- **Writing:** Cut scores fall within a range of 8 points, from a high of 88 in Connecticut to a low of 80 in Texas.
- **Math-Elementary Algebra:** Cut scores demonstrate the greatest variation by far, with a 28-point range, from a high of 82 in Massachusetts to a low of 54 in Connecticut.

### Cut Scores for Other Statewide Placement Assessments

Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas use assessments other than COMPASS or ACCUPLACER.

- Florida uses a computerized placement test, the College Placement Test (CPT), which is a version of ACCUPLACER customized for Florida. Florida sets a single cut score of 83 for the reading, math-elementary algebra, and writing sentence skills sections.
- Texas allows institutions to use a state-specific assessment instrument, the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). Students scoring a 230 on reading and math and a 220 on writing can avoid further assessment for developmental education.
- Oklahoma's cut score policy is unique among *Achieving the Dream* states, using the ACT as a "first cut" placement score. Students who fail to score at least 19 on the math and English sections of the ACT must undergo additional testing to determine whether developmental education is necessary. Colleges are free to determine which secondary assessments to use to place students who do not pass the state's first cut.

**Table 4: Common Cut Scores for COMPASS<sup>4</sup>**

COMPASS	AR	HI	NC	OH	TX	VA
Reading	82	79	81	69	81	81
Writing	75	74	70	—	59	76
Math-Algebra	41	50	*	65	39	44

\*47 on Pre-Algebra section

**Table 5: Common Cut Scores for ACCUPLACER<sup>5</sup>**

ACCUPLACER	CT	MA	NC	TX
Reading	83	68	80	78
Writing	88	*	86	80
Math-Elementary Algebra	54	82	55	63

\*Institutions encouraged to assess writing samples on site

## Does it all matter?

The underlying questions in all this research are: What effect do cut score policies have on institutional behavior, and what is their impact on student success? Is the variation between the lowest and highest cut score smaller in states that set standard cut scores or ranges? Do cut score policies lead to more coherence and consistency?

To answer these questions, we asked community colleges in *Achieving the Dream* states to report their cut scores on the reading, writing, and math sections of the COMPASS and ACCUPLACER exams. We identified the median cut score reported for each test section in each state, and averaged these medians across states with common cut scores and states with flexible policies. We used this average median cut score to compare differences in cut scores across these groups. Similarly, we identified the range between the lowest and highest cut scores for each test section reported by the community colleges in each state, and averaged these ranges across states, comparing the average ranges for states with common cut scores against the average ranges for states with flexible policies.

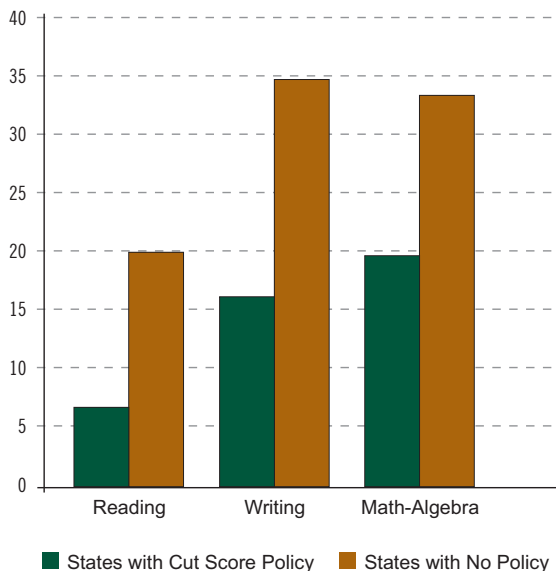
Additional research is needed to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of common placement assessment policies on the variation in cut scores from college to college within states.

With this caveat and the limitations of the data in mind, the preponderance of the data suggests that—as one might expect—there is more variation in cut scores in states with flexible cut score policies. This outcome suggests that, absent a common cut score standard, the expectations individual colleges have about the academic skills necessary for success in entry-level courses often vary broadly. It is also worth noting that, for both the COMPASS and ACCUPLACER exams, states' cut scores were most similar on the reading section and least similar on the math section, regardless of which policies were in place. Several *Achieving the Dream* states have attempted to narrow the variation in expectations and standards of the colleges by systematizing their cut score policies; others are moving in the same direction.

## COMPASS

The COMPASS cut scores reported by *Achieving the Dream* states suggest that policies establishing common cut scores or ranges narrow variation in scores across institutions. However, all institutions—whether in states with common cut score policies or not—hover around a similar median score for both reading and writing.

### COMPASS Cut Score Range: States with Cut Score Policy vs. States with No Policy



The existence of common cut score policies does appear to reduce the variability of cut scores on the COMPASS test within a state. States with common cut score policies reported a narrower range of cut scores than states with flexible, institution-set cut scores. This pattern held for the reading, writing, and math-algebra sections. States with common cut score policies exhibited average ranges of 7, 17, and 20 points on the reading, writing, and math-algebra sections, respectively. In states with flexible policies, these average ranges were considerably larger and in the case of reading and writing more than doubled: 20 points for the reading section, 35 points for the writing section, and 34 points for the math-algebra section.

However, there were no major differences in the median cut scores used in states with common

cut scores in comparison to states with flexible policies, except for those in math. For the reading section, both states with common cut score policies and states with flexible policies had a median cut score of 80. For the writing section, states with common cut score policies had an average median cut score of 72, as compared with 73 in states with flexible policies. For the math-algebra section, the average median cut score reported by states with flexible policies was 57, somewhat higher than the average median cut score of 46 in states with common cut score policies (see Table 6).

### ACCUPLACER

Very few colleges in *Achieving the Dream* states with flexible cut score policies use the ACCUPLACER exam. Among the six states in this group from which we received data, only six colleges reported cut scores for any given section of ACCUPLACER, and only three reported data on all three identified sections. Consequently, it is difficult to make comparisons between states in this group and those using common placement policies. The data are provided here for reference, but we urge caution in interpreting the results.

**Table 6: Median Cut Scores for COMPASS, States with Cut Score Policy vs. States with No Policy**

COMPASS—Cut Score States	Count	Range	Median	COMPASS—States with No Policy	Count	Range	Median
<b>Arkansas</b>				<b>Michigan</b>			
Reading	22	2	82.0	Reading	18	38	77.0
Writing	22	6	75.0	Writing	17	69	70.0
Math - Algebra	22	30	51.5	Math - Algebra	17	40	45.0
<b>Hawaii</b>				<b>New Mexico</b>			
Reading	7	0	79.0	Reading			
Writing	7	0	74.0	Writing	11	8	71.0
Math - Algebra	7	0	50.0	Math - Algebra	10	15	63.0
<b>North Carolina</b>				<b>Oklahoma</b>			
Reading	58	8	81.0	Reading	11	12	80.0
Writing	58	10	70.0	Writing	11	58	74.0
Math - Algebra	4	9	41.0	Math - Algebra	10	36	53.0
<b>Ohio</b>				<b>Pennsylvania</b>			
Reading	12	18	77.5	Reading	4	16	77.5
Writing	12	27	75.5	Writing	3	39	70.0
Math - Algebra	10	39	51.0	Math - Algebra	3	48	44.0
<b>Texas</b>				<b>South Carolina</b>			
Reading	35	3	81.0	Reading	9	16	83.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	36	46	59.0	Writing	12	15	75.0
Math - Algebra	36	32	39.0	Math - Algebra	12	34	66.0
<b>Virginia</b>				<b>Washington</b>			
Reading	20	12	78.0	Reading	16	20	81.0
Writing	19	12	76.0	Writing	33	21	78.0
Math - Algebra	18	11	44.0	Math - Algebra	11	31	71.0
<b>CUT SCORE STATES AVERAGE</b>				<b>FLEXIBLE STATES AVERAGE</b>			
Reading		7.2	79.8	Reading		20.4	79.7
Writing		16.8	71.6	Writing		35.0	73.0
Math - Algebra		20.2	46.1	Math - Algebra		34.0	57.0

**Key:**

Count=Number of community colleges reporting  
 Range=Range between high and low cut scores used by institutions in the state  
 Median=Median cut score for each test section in each state



For the ACCUPLACER exam, there was no evidence that common cut score policies had an effect on the variability of scores within a state, likely due in part to the small sample size. States with policies in place exhibited ranges of 16, 9, and 34 points on the reading, writing, and math (algebra) sections, respectively; states with flexible policies had ranges of 10, 7, and 30 points on these sections, respectively (see Table 7).

There were minimal differences in average median cut scores between these groups. For the reading section, states with common cut score policies had an average median cut score of 78, as compared with 77 in states with flexible policies. For the writing and math sections, states with flexible policies had slightly higher median cut scores: 87 on the writing section and 72 on the math-algebra section, as opposed to 84 and 65, respectively, in states with common cut scores.

**Tables 7: Median Cut Scores for ACCUPLACER, States with Cut Score Policy vs. States with No Policy**

ACCUPLACER—Cut Score States	Count	Range	Median
<b>Connecticut</b>			
Reading Comprehension	11	31	81.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	10	28	87.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	11	36	58.0
<b>Massachusetts</b>			
Reading Comprehension	10	28	68.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	4	19	74.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	5	20	82.0
<b>North Carolina</b>			
Reading Comprehension	55	0	80.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	55	0	86.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	1	0	57.0
<b>Ohio</b>			
Reading Comprehension	2	2	82.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	2	0	92.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	2	69	62.5
<b>Texas</b>			
Reading Comprehension	44	18	78.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	41	0	80.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	43	43	63.0
<b>CUT SCORE STATES AVERAGE</b>			
Reading Comprehension		15.8	77.8
Writing - Sentence Skills		9.4	83.8
Math - Elementary Algebra		33.6	64.5

ACCUPLACER—States with No Policy	Count	Range	Median
<b>Michigan</b>			
Reading Comprehension	4	8	75.5
Writing - Sentence Skills	1	0	86.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	4	43	50.5
<b>New Mexico</b>			
Reading Comprehension	5	13	80.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	6	6	85.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	4	37	88.0
<b>Oklahoma</b>			
Reading Comprehension	3	2	80.0
Writing - Sentence Skills	3	2	80.0
Math - Elementary Algebra	3	32	73.0
<b>Pennsylvania</b>			
Reading Comprehension	4	22	64.5
Writing - Sentence Skills	2	21	90.5
Math - Elementary Algebra	4	27	53.0
<b>Washington</b>			
Reading Comprehension	2	3	85.5
Writing - Sentence Skills	6	8	94.5
Math - Elementary Algebra	4	11	93.5
<b>FLEXIBLE STATES AVERAGE</b>			
Reading Comprehension		9.6	77.1
Writing - Sentence Skills		7.4	87.2
Math - Elementary Algebra		30.0	71.6

**Key:**

Count=Number of community colleges reporting

Range=Range between high and low cut scores used by institutions in the state

Median=Median cut score for each test section in each state

## APPENDIX B

### METHODOLOGY

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Jobs for the Future asked *Achieving the Dream* state lead organizations if they kept data on the placement cut scores for each community college. Connecticut, Florida, New Mexico, Arkansas, Hawaii, and Oklahoma provided matrices of the placement cut scores used by their community colleges.<sup>6</sup> JFF then contacted each community college to verify the data in the matrices.

For states without central repositories of placement cut scores, JFF collected data by calling community college assessment directors. In interviews, we asked them for information on the placement assessments used and the minimum cut score that students must earn to be placed into college-level courses. Our research questions focused on the ACCUPLACER and COMPASS placement assessments, used by the vast majority of community colleges.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, we requested the placement cut scores for the following test sections:

- **ACCUPLACER:** Provided by the College Board, ACCUPLACER is a computer-adaptive placement testing program that uses a student's performance on one question to determine the difficulty of the next question. ACCUPLACER's general assessments cover reading comprehension, sentence skills, arithmetic, elementary algebra, and college-level mathematics. Each test is scored on a 120-point scale. ACCUPLACER also offers *WritePlacer*, which electronically scores students' writing samples. Scores on the *WritePlacer Plus* range from 2 to 12, while scores on the *Texas WritePlacer* range from 2 to 8.
- **COMPASS:** Provided by ACT, COMPASS is a computer-adaptive placement testing program that uses a student's performance on one question to determine the difficulty of the next question. Its placement measures assess mathematics (pre-algebra/numerical skills, algebra, college algebra, geometry, and trigonometry), reading, and writing skills. Each of these tests is scored on a 100-point scale. COMPASS also offers *e-Write*, which electronically scores students' writing samples. COMPASS *e-Write* exams can be scored on a 2 to 8 scale or 2 to 12 scale.

In addition to collecting placement cut score data, JFF collected information on state-level placement cut score policies through interviews with state policy officials and a review of statutes, administrative rules, and policy manuals. We conducted interviews to identify the actions states and/or institutions require when students fall short of minimum placement cut scores. Specifically, we sought to answer the following questions:

- Are new students required to take assessment tests for placement into developmental education?
- Does the state require specific tests?
- Does the state specify which students are exempt (using SAT/ACT) and, if so, who is exempt?
- Is there a statewide placement cut score?
- Are students required to enroll in or complete developmental coursework within a certain time period?

JFF conducted follow-up interviews to ensure the accuracy of the campus-level placement cut score data. However, because these data are self-reported, there is room for error; they should be interpreted with caution. We often found discrepancies in reported cut scores within institutions and offices, in large part because many institutions use multiple assessments for a single subject area. While we conducted multiple rounds of calls to collect the most accurate data possible, we cannot guarantee that these data are completely accurate.

As a supplement to these data, JFF conducted a brief national survey of developmental education policies in spring 2008. This survey consisted of reviews of published statutes, administrative rules, and policy manuals, as well as interviews with state-level education administrators. Data were gathered for 31 of the 35 states that do not participate in *Achieving the Dream*. These data, in combination with data gathered from *Achieving the Dream* states, provided information on the policies and practices in 46 states—a thorough picture of nationwide trends in developmental education placement and assessment policies.

## APPENDIX C

### STATE POLICIES ON DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING THE DREAM STATES

Sources	Does the state require new students to be assessed for placement into developmental education?	Does the state require specific tests?	Does the state specify which students are exempt (using ACT/SAT)? If so, who is exempt?	Is there a statewide placement test cut score?	Does the state require students to enroll in or complete developmental coursework within a certain time period?
<b>ARKANSAS</b> Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board Policies	Yes. All first-time entering freshmen at state-supported colleges and universities must be tested in English composition, reading, and mathematics.	Yes. Schools administer the COMPASS and ASSET exams.	Yes. ACT: students with a 19 on math may enroll in college-level math, 19 in English in college-level English, and 19 in reading are exempt from developmental reading. SAT: 460 on quantitative for math, 470 on verbal for composition and reading	Yes. COMPASS: 41 on algebra, 75 on writing, 82 on reading ASSET: 39 on intermediate algebra, 45 on writing, 43 on reading	Yes. Reading: 1st or 2nd semester and each subsequent semester until complete Math: before college-level math taken English comp: before being awarded credit for freshman English, but freshman English can be taken concurrently
<b>CONNECTICUT</b> Connecticut Community Colleges Board of Trustees Policy Manual	Yes. At minimum, institutions must assess incoming students in reading comprehension, sentence skills, and mathematics.	Yes. Institutions are instructed to use the ACCUPLACER for reading comprehension, sentence skills, and mathematics.	Yes. Students scoring 550 or higher on the math section of the SAT are eligible for college-level math. Students with a SAT verbal or SAT essay score of 500 or higher would be eligible to enroll in ENG 101.	Yes. ACCUPLACER: 54 on intermediate algebra or 40 on college-level math; 88 on sentence skills; 83 on English comprehension	No. However, a major conference is planned for November 16, after which there might be greater standardization.
<b>FLORIDA</b> Rule 6A-10.0315 of Florida Administrative Code 2007 Florida Statute: Title XLVIII, Chapter 1008	Yes. First-time-in-college degree applicants are tested in reading, writing, and mathematics prior to completing registration.	Yes. Schools administer the Florida College Entry-Level Placement Test (the CPT). They also may identify optional supplemental tests for placement.	Yes. The state determines which ACT/SAT scores qualify for exemption, but the college president may choose whether or not to accept the ACT/SAT.	Yes (but colleges can set higher scores). CPT: 72 on elementary algebra, 83 on reading comprehension, 83 on sentence skills	Yes. Full-time students (12+ credits) must begin developmental courses in 1st term, part-time students before completing 12 credits. Students must complete developmental courses by the time they have 12 credits or must maintain continuous enrollment in developmental courses. Students are permitted to take courses in other areas concurrently.
<b>HAWAII</b> University of Hawaii Community College System - COMPASS Test Placement Scores Memo: System-wide COMPASS scores	Yes. The University of Hawaii System is the public system of higher education in Hawaii and administers placement tests in all of its community colleges.	Yes. All University of Hawaii community colleges administer the COMPASS.	Yes. Beginning in fall 2007, SAT/ACT exemptions will be standardized across the system. Prior to fall '07, decisions were made at the individual school level.	Yes (though there are slight differences of interpretation across the schools). COMPASS: 50 on algebra, 79 on reading, 74 on writing	No. No state policy explicitly stipulates when students must enroll in or complete developmental courses. However, system-wide, COMPASS scores have a two-year shelf-life before they become invalid.

Sources	Does the state require new students to be assessed for placement into developmental education?	Does the state require specific tests?	Does the state specify which students are exempt (using ACT/SAT)? If so, who is exempt?	Is there a statewide placement test cut score?	Does the state require students to enroll in or complete developmental coursework within a certain time period?
<b>MASSACHUSETTS</b> Massachusetts Board of Higher Education: Assessment Policies Common Assessment report	Yes. Institutions are required to assess the basic academic skills of entering students (MGL Chapter 15A Section 32 provides authority for this action).	Yes. Institutions are expected to use the ACCUPLACER.	Yes. SAT: 500 on the verbal section exempts student from reading assessment, 600 on verbal exempts student from both reading and writing; all students are assessed in math	Yes. Cut scores exist for both math and reading, but institutions are encouraged to assess writing samples on site (with scoring guidance provided by the state). ACCUPLACER: 82 on elementary algebra or 40 on college-level math, 68 on reading	No. Board policy states that institutions are encouraged to follow 'best practice' in assessment and placement, including . . . completion of developmental coursework during the spring or summer prior to registration, but no state-level policy requires developmental courses to be completed in a certain time period.
<b>MICHIGAN</b> None	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.
<b>NEW MEXICO</b> New Mexico Department of Higher Education cut score matrix	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. However, a task force is working on alignment and cut score issues, so greater standardization is possible in the future.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.
<b>NORTH CAROLINA</b> Validation of Placement Tests Scores Recommendation - NCCCS (authority from SL 1993-321, Section 108)	Yes. Placement testing in reading, writing, and math is mandatory for all students taking curriculum-level courses with a developmental prerequisite.	Yes. Colleges must use one or more of the following tests: ASSET, COMPASS, CPT, or ACCUPLACER. The Placement Testing Committee must approve other tests.	Yes. Colleges may grant exemptions to students demonstrating proficiency through ACT or SAT scores, but individual colleges can determine which scores to accept.	Yes (with a few schools exempted). COMPASS: 47 on pre-algebra for math, 70 on writing, and 81 on reading for English comprehension ASSET: 41 on numerical skills for math, 41 on writing, and 41 on reading for English comprehension ACCUPLACER: 55 on arithmetic for math, 86 on sentence skills, and 80 on reading comprehension for English comprehension	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.

Sources	Does the state require new students to be assessed for placement into developmental education?	Does the state require specific tests?	Does the state specify which students are exempt (using ACT/SAT)? If so, who is exempt?	Is there a statewide placement test cut score?	Does the state require students to enroll in or complete developmental coursework within a certain time period?
OHIO	University System of Ohio Strategic Plan for Higher Education, 2008-2017	Yes. The ACT, SAT, and COMPASS	Yes. Students scoring 18 or higher on the English section of the ACT or 22 or higher on the Algebra section of the ACT are exempt. Equivalent SAT scores may also be used.	Yes. Students must score 69 or higher on the English or 65 or higher on the algebra section of COMPASS to be placed in non-remedial courses.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.
OKLAHOMA	Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education Policy Manual	Yes. Oklahoma requires that all schools accept the ACT. In addition to this, institutions are free to choose their own secondary exams for students failing to get ACT exemptions.	Yes. Students scoring below 19 on the math, English, reading, or science reasoning sections of the ACT must undergo additional testing or enroll in the corresponding developmental course(s). Institutions may establish higher standards by requiring additional testing of those meeting/exceeding these scores.	Yes. Institutions must follow the state's ACT score minimum for placement test exemptions. Individual schools can select their own cut scores for secondary assessments.	Yes. Developmental courses should be completed as early as possible and within the first 24 college-level hours attempted. Students continuously enrolled in developmental courses may be allowed to continue enrollment beyond 24-hour limit. Students must remove deficiencies in a subject before taking college-level work in that subject.
PENNSYLVANIA	None	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions. College presidents are discussing a voluntary move to a placement test/cut score policy, but it will take time to accomplish if they decide to go in this direction.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.
SOUTH CAROLINA	South Carolina State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education Procedure No. 3-2-101.1	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.	No. Individual institutions make these decisions.
		Yes. Institutions must establish minimum placement criteria for admission into developmental studies which reflect an analysis of students' entry level skills for each curriculum.			

Sources	Does the state require new students to be assessed for placement into developmental education?	Does the state require specific tests?	Does the state specify which students are exempt (using ACT/SAT)? If so, who is exempt?	Is there a statewide placement test cut score?	Does the state require students to enroll in or complete developmental coursework within a certain time period?
<b>TEXAS</b>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>Students must be assessed prior to enrollment or, in exceptional circumstances, during their first semester. Schools have discretion in the creation of academic plans.</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board approves the use of ASSET, COMPASS, ACCUPLACER, and the Texas Higher Education Assessment.</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>ACT: composite 23 with a minimum 19 on English and/or math exempts one from the corresponding section(s)  SAT: combined 1070 with a minimum 500 verbal and/or math exempts one for corresponding section(s)</p>	<p>Yes (but colleges can set higher scores).</p> <p>ASSET: 41 reading, 38 elementary algebra, 40 writing skills, 6 essay  COMPASS: 81 reading, 39 algebra, 59 writing skills, 6 essay  ACCUPLACER: 78 reading, 63 elementary algebra, 80 sentence skills, 6 essay  THEA: 230 reading, 230 mathematics, 220 writing</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>
<b>VIRGINIA</b>	<p>Yes.</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>VA community colleges have agreed to use the COMPASS.</p>	<p>Yes.</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>Institutions use these COMPASS cut score ranges (some keep the ranges, others use specific scores within them):  Reading: 81 (76-80 decision zone)  Writing: 76 (69-75 decision zone)  Algebra: 44 (39-43 decision zone)  College Algebra: 41 (36-40 decision zone)</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>
<b>WASHINGTON</b>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>Individual institutions make these decisions.</p>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These data are self-reported and were collected by Jobs for the Future via interviews and a review of statutes, administrative rules, and policy manuals in late 2007 and early 2008. See Appendix B: Methodology for further information.
- <sup>2</sup> Learn more about Achieve, Inc.'s American Diploma Project Network at [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org).
- <sup>3</sup> The “quality vs. access” debate is an ongoing conversation about how to continually widen access to postsecondary education while maintaining high academic standards.
- <sup>4</sup> These scores are the bottom of the range for those states reporting a range.
- <sup>5</sup> These scores are the bottom of the range for those states reporting a range.
- <sup>6</sup> Oklahoma uses a placement cut score of 19 on the ACT, which is referred to as a “first cut.” Students who don't meet the first cut are subject to further placement testing at the institution level.
- <sup>7</sup> Florida uses a customized version of ACCU-PLACER called the CPT, and Texas institutions can use the Texas Higher Education Assessment in lieu of another test.

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