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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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Moving From High-Stakes Exams to Meaningful Placement



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Placement testing is a routine part of the college intake process even though the inequities built into standardized tests are well known in higher education and are the antithesis of an open access institution like a community college (Nettles, 2019; Wai et al., 2008). The great majority of two-year college students begin their college journey by taking high-stakes standardized tests that assign them a placement score in math and English. To give students a better shot at success, and with the welcome departure of the nationally standardized COMPASS placement test, Lake Washington Institute of Technology took the opportunity offered and transformed its college placement practices.

With the help of a grant from College Spark Washington, a team from Instructional Administration, faculty, Student Services and Institutional Research designed its “Smart Start” assessment project. This initiative had two goals for student placement. First, it would maximize the number of students who could be placed directly into college courses through evidence of prior experience (such as other test scores or high school transcripts). Second, the experience for those students who needed to test would be more relevant and lower stakes, with students having a say in choosing the level of math or English in which they would begin.

To start the redesigned process, students are guided by an admission coach through a Personalized Getting Started Checklist. The coach explains to students the options available for bypassing testing based on their prior experience. The list of ways in which students can place by experience is a lengthy one: they can use indicators such as pre-existing ACT/SAT scores, high school transcripts, a completed AP course in high school, or placement test results from another college. Students who have any of these items move directly to advising and registration without a stop in the college assessment center. They also bypass any courses in the developmental education sequences, starting directly in college math and English, shortening their pathways, and saving themselves time and money.

If students do not have any prior academic experience that can be used for placement, the college evaluates their academic level using the redesigned assessments in math and English. All LWTech student services staff help create a low stakes environment for this experience by telling students that, once they have completed the tests, they will have a voice in deciding on the levels of English and math at which they are ultimately placed. As a result, Assessment Center staff have observed students who are less stressed taking the new placement exams. The intent of the redesigned assessment process



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is to help students make an informed choice regarding their skills and register for the highest-possible, track-relevant course where they can feel “comfortably challenged.”

Alignment of assessments with classroom content

In order to make the assessment instruments relevant to our college’s curriculum, both the math and English placement tools were completely redone to match authentic course requirements. Rather than creating a home-grown math assessment, math faculty selected a Washington-based online assessment tool that is commonly used in K-12 and community colleges for online math work (WAMAP). Many students come to LWTech already familiar with the WAMAP system, and that system is used throughout all levels of the college math curriculum. For the assessment itself, the tool allows for LWTech faculty to select the test items, which are chosen for alignment with the types of problems students will encounter in college classes. Students complete tests that will evaluate their skill level for beginning on either STEM or non-STEM math pathways. Results are scored automatically and delivered to both the student and the college.

The college English Department made the decision to design its own authentic testing instrument. In contrast to the late, unlamented COMPASS test, which was essentially a grammar exam that involved no writing, the English test was redesigned to measure writing ability directly. Students read an essay that is commonly used in developmental education and college English classrooms and then write an essay of

their own, responding to a prompt developed by English faculty. Completed essays are assessed by a faculty reader (usually an adjunct instructor reimbursed for this work), who scores them using a department-designed rubric and then gives a recommendation for course placement. Essays are scored and returned to students within a 24-hour window.

Giving students agency in the process

Once students receive their initial placement recommendation, they can prepare for their advising appointment by watching videos on math and English placement that are available online. During their advising appointment, advisors provide them with information on the specific content of courses in the math and English sequences as well as tutoring and other supplemental resources. Finally, advisors explain the course recommendations and the options available to students for choosing their courses – they can register for a class at the level determined by their assessment, or pick the course one level above or below. The opt up or down option is a unique feature of this model. At this point, LWTech has clearly changed what had been a stressful, high-stakes experience into an informative tool. Did the student have a bad test day? Are they notoriously poor at taking standardized tests? Has it been a long time since they’ve taken a math test? Are they taking a full load and working full-time and might not be able to handle a tougher class?

As described by one faculty member, “For students who have not been in school for a long time, the new assessment process gives them a positive opportunity to have a say in their educa-

tional journey from the very start. They are able to reflect on their past experiences, and combine that with a realistic look at what the expectations are for the courses they need to take, and use that information to make a choice that makes the most sense for them as an individual.”

Results from the data

Students Placing Below College Level English:

In 2018-19, 20% of students (n=36) chose to opt up; of those who opted up, 81% passed. In 2019-20, 9% of students (n=32) chose to opt up; of those who opted up, 79% passed.

Students Using the Non-STEM Math Pathway (used by 70% of LWTech students):

In 2018-19, 18% of students (n=40) chose to opt up; of those who opted up to college-level math, 93% passed. In 2019-20, 21% of students (n=65) chose to opt up; of those who opted up, 94% passed.

Students Using the STEM Math Pathway:

In 2018-19, 64% of students (n=164) chose to opt up; of those that opted up to college-level math, 89% passed. In 2019-20, 16% of students (n=50) chose to opt up; of those who opted up to college-level math, 85% passed.

In 2019-20, 60% of entering students used Guided Self Placement; the remaining 40% of students were placed through previous transcripts or ACT/SAT scores.

The college will be exploring the drop in percent of students opting up to see if that is related to issues stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the college’s remote status for all math and

English classes.

This data indicates that the project is achieving its two primary goals: 1) allowing students to choose, potentially shortening their pathway, without harming their academic achievement and 2) getting a significant percentage of them to use prior experience and bypass the testing process altogether. Historically, at LWTech and elsewhere, fewer than half of the students who assess into upper-level developmental education have passed the next course in the sequence. A student placing into upper-level developmental education under LWTech's revised system and selecting up has a 90% chance of completing college-level math and a 79% chance of completing college-level English.

Because the data indicates that it's a good deal for students to opt up, college faculty and advisors have spoken on several occasions about whether or not to begin strongly recommending students exercise this option. However, the college decided to continue to support students in their choice, which aligns with the philosophy that students know best in their decisions, privy to life circumstances that college staff would be unaware of.

Next generation of testing models

Following the old adage, "Don't let a good crisis go to waste," which has become a daily mantra lately, the instructional team partnered again with Student Services in summer 2020 to modify how students take the placement tests. Initially after moving to remote operations due to COVID, students took proctored placement tests over Zoom, with one proctor per stu-

dent, creating an untenable bottleneck

The team developed a way to allow students to take the tests through Canvas without being proctored. Faculty agreed to trust students' assessment scores. Students are sent a link that expires at midnight that same day. English faculty are scoring tests within 24 hours, and the math tests continue to be automatically graded. Faculty were asked to observe the students in the first week of class to assess if they needed to be moved to a different level. In its first quarter of operations, the Dean did not hear an outcry from faculty about misplaced students.

The college will continue assessing how these students are faring in this modified test taking environment. If it works, this could be one more example of something we keep in place even after we return to campus. And, it will be one more way to help lower the stakes and assure students are placed into English and math in a meaningful way.

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