Not long ago I was at a meeting of community college and high school faculty, talking about college readiness in our region. “Tell us what we need to do,” said one high school teacher, frustrated that so many of her students were ending up in remedial courses when they enrolled in a community college. “We really want them to be prepared for you guys.”

Three-quarters of California community college students are classified “unprepared” upon entry, and their long-term outcomes are bleak. Just 40 percent of unprepared students go on to complete a degree or certificate, or transfer, within six years, compared to 70 percent of prepared students.

This is often framed as a “college readiness” problem in the high schools, but a growing body of research shows that incoming students are actually more ready than community colleges have recognized.

The Community College Research Center examined data from a large, urban community college system and found that many of the students placed into remedial
courses didn’t actually need remediation. The study estimated that 61 percent of incoming students could earn a C or better in college-level English courses if allowed to enroll, but only 19 percent were eligible to do so under the placement test administered to incoming students. In math, the study predicted that 50 percent of incoming students would succeed in college-level courses, while just 25 percent were eligible to take them.

To understand this, you need to know how community colleges determine “readiness.” For the most part, colleges don’t review student transcripts, or assess samples of student writing. Instead, students take placement tests consisting of short, multiple-choice questions in English and math, often without preparing or understanding the stakes. And if they score below a certain level, they are required to take up to two years of remedial reading, writing and/or math courses. If they’re placed into English as a second language courses, it could be more than two years.

Placement tests are weak predictors of students’ performance in college. A second CCRC study found that standardized reading and writing tests explain less than 2 percent of the variation in students’ college grades. ACT’s Compass – one of the most popular placement tests used nationally – is being taken off the market, with the test-maker directly acknowledging its limitations in assessing readiness.

By relying on these tests, community colleges underestimate the abilities of many students. This was illustrated by the Multiple Measures Assessment Project, which analyzed a large dataset from California high schools and community colleges. The researchers determined that 72 percent of incoming community college students could be placed directly into college-level English courses by using high school transcript measures instead of their scores on placement tests, and that these students would do just fine, earning an average grade of C+. In other words, nearly three-quarters of
students are coming out of high school prepared for college English.

Another problem with colleges’ current approach is the use of a single, algebra-based definition of “readiness” in math. A student with shaky algebra skills might be under-prepared for a Pre-Calculus course, but that same student could do perfectly well in College Statistics, because little algebra is required there. Colleges and universities need to recognize that different college-level courses demand different prerequisite math skills (as the University of California has recently done for Statistics courses). Unless a course requires substantial algebra – that is, unless a student is highly unlikely to succeed without it – algebra-based testing and prerequisites are not legitimate.

Why does all this matter? Because placement is destiny. When students are assessed “not college ready,” the treatment prescribed – layers of remedial coursework – leaves them less likely to reach their goals. Statewide, among community college students who start three or more courses below college math, just six out of 100 will complete a math course within three years that they can use to transfer to a four-year university.

One recent study found that students’ initial course placement is the single largest driver of racial inequities in long-term college completion rates. African-American and Hispanic students are much more likely to be excluded from college-level courses based on our non-predictive placement tests. These students are also disproportionately concentrated in the lowest levels of remedial math, a starting point from which they have virtually no chance of earning a degree.

In a little over a year, California community colleges will begin piloting a new “common assessment” system, with all 113 colleges administering the same English, ESL and math tests to their incoming students. Plans are also underway to include
high school transcript information, such as students’ grade point average and English and math coursework, so that colleges can consider this in course placement. But for the system to be effective and benefit all students, the California Department of Education needs to provide statewide, automated high school transcript data to community colleges, rather than the scattershot, district-by-district transcript-sharing currently in place.

The shift to a common assessment provides a tremendous opportunity for community colleges. Research shows that by enabling more students to begin taking college-level courses as soon as they enroll, colleges can substantially increase student completion and narrow achievement gaps for students of color. Even greater power lies in combining changes in course placements with redesigned, accelerated models of remediation, which are helping many more students to complete college-level requirements in California and other states.

Over the last several years, there has been a lot of research into the disappointing completion rates among students classified “under-prepared.” But there is reason for optimism: When colleges accelerate students’ progress into college-level courses, they’re seeing that students are much more prepared than previously believed.

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