

Implementing Computerized Placement testing

Ohlone Story

Submitted by Wayne Takakuwa

Overview

By the end of the 2004-2005 academic year, the placement tests that Ohlone had been using (ASSET for English and math and SLEP for ESL) would no longer be approved for use by the California Community College Chancellor's Office. Ohlone needed to institute new testing instruments within the next year.

This posed a serious challenge but it was also provided an excellent opportunity to improve the entire testing and placement process. For the previous several years, there had been discussions about moving toward computerized placement tests but costs, staffing, implementation issues made it seem prohibitive.

Martha Brown who had recently become the Dean of Counseling and Matriculation Coordinator began researching computerized testing. She assigned one of the counselors, Wayne Takakuwa to be the Assessment Coordinator and to implement this transition.

During that fall 2005 term, three advisory committees were formed consisting of faculty from each of the basic skills departments: the English Assessment Committee (Rakesh Swamy, Allison Kuehner and John Baczuk), the Math Assessment Committee (Bob Bradshaw, Ron Staszko, Linda Messia and Ilene Katz), and the ESL Assessment Committee (Vicki Curtis and Connie Olsen). These three committees were chaired by the Assessment Coordinator and met regularly during the 2005-2006 year. Each committee completed the following process:

1. Evaluated and compared 2-3 computerized tests to determine which one had the most desirable testing features for their discipline; selected their preferred test.
2. Reviewed the pre-requisite skills required for each of the basic skills courses in their discipline.
3. Conducted a test validation study by comparing the prerequisite skills for each course versus the questions contained in the computerized test
4. Determined the initial cut scores for placement into each course-level.
5. Evaluated research data gathered from students and instructors regarding the accuracy of each student's course placement; and, where necessary, adjusted the cut scores to improve placement accuracy.

[Steps 1 through 4 were completed between September 2005 through the April 2007. The ESL Committee has already completed step 5, but the English and Math committees are still in the process of completing this process.]

Benefits of New Placement Tests

The English and Math committees selected Accuplacer (College Board). The ESL Committee selected Compass/ESL (ACT).

Accuplacer was selected because it has the following important characteristics

- Completely web-based and easily administered both on and off campus
 - allows for flex testing at feeder high schools; it also allows expanded testing at various Ohlone computer labs and classroom
- For each test session, questions are randomly selected from a pool of question

- Greatly reduces the chances of cheating; the previous paper pencil test came in only one version.
- Enables the college to allow retesting (currently, students may retest after 21 days).
- Self-adjusting--the difficulty of each question is based on how the student responds to previous questions
 - results in a test that is much shorter (reading and writing tests contain 20 questions, math contains 12-20 question)
 - students tend to be more focused since there are fewer questions that are too easy or too difficult
- Untimed
 - reduces test anxiety
 - more suitable for students with learning disabilities
- Immediate scoring and placement
 - The previous test required that students wait several days to get their results. Now students can get their English and math course placements as soon as they complete the test.
 - students who previously needed to take more than one math test (which required multiple test days) could now complete all necessary math tests in a single test session

English and math tests are now given on a more regular basis throughout the year. Test instructions are incorporated into the computer program, so minimal proctoring assistance is needed. Students are able to start the test during a range of times and are less affected by scheduling restraints.

The ESL Committee selected Compass/ESL (ACT). Compass/ESL has most of the characteristics of Accuplacer (above). It is not entirely web-based because it requires the installation of a special secure interface. This makes it more difficult to administer outside the Ohlone testing center. However, it had one key component that the other computerized ESL tests did not have—a Listening test that was approved for use by California Community Colleges.

Previous research showed that many students who had taken the ESL test failed to complete the orientation or registration process. So the committee modified the testing process and created an all-in-one ESL session that incorporated the placement test, an orientation, counseling/advising and course registration into a single session. While these sessions last 4-5 hours (depending on how much time a student needs to complete the computerized test) and may seem a little long, students are very satisfied knowing they can receive all the assistance necessary to start classes in their new school.

Other Benefits to the College

There have been several other benefits that resulted from the process of implementing these new placement tests.

First, the process has been linked to a college-wide Basic Skills Initiative to improve the effectiveness of all basic skills instruction. The evaluation of the tests has involved discussions which have helped clarify student learning outcomes for each course level in the writing, reading, ESL and math sequences. It has also reinforced the effort to standardize curriculum and course requirements so all faculty (full time and part time) who teach each course-level are teaching to the same standards.

Second, the evaluation of the writing/reading and ESL tests has helped spur discussion and analysis about how to more effectively link the ESL curriculum and learning outcomes to the English reading/writing curriculum and pre-requisite skills.

The implementation of a new placement test has also led to an exploration of a basic skills diagnostic program which would be linked to the placement test. This diagnostic program could identify the

prerequisite skills/knowledge the student needs to be able to move from their current placement level to the next higher level. In other words, a student who did not quite score high enough to be placed into intermediate algebra could take an algebra diagnostic test to identify the specific pre-requisite skills that need to be remediated; once this student has studied these skills, he/she could re-test for placement into intermediate algebra. This could be an important step toward reducing the time a student needs to complete a certificate, an associate degree or a transfer program.

Relationship to Ohlone's Core Values

There were several core values that guided the effort to implement the new placement test.

#2. Open access to higher education and actively reach out to underserved populations

Students' who begin college with low English and math skills are much less likely to successfully complete certificate or degree programs. A comprehensive basic skills program and proper placement into the basic skills courses are both crucial if Ohlone College is to be truly accessible for these students.

#4. High standards in our constant pursuit of excellence.

Ohlone College had paper-pencil testing for many years, and could have continued using this type of placement test. However, moving to a computer-based test greatly improved the quality of the placement process for the student. Computerized testing has made the placement test more available to students by allowing more flexible testing schedules, and has made it a less intimidating experience by reducing the text anxiety and providing students with immediate placement results.

#6. Team work and open communication

During the entire process of implementing this new placement process faculty from English, math, ESL and counseling have collaborated closely and worked as a team. This collaboration continues as faculty work to refine the cut-scores and work to improve counseling, advising, and orientation services for basic skills students. In addition, the IT department was an integral part of the process because they facilitated the purchase of the computer equipment and the technical support needed integrate Accuplacer and Compass/ESL with Ohlone's Datatel system.

Relationship to College Goals

Develop across the curriculum the Learning College Model, utilizing methods and technologies that hold the most promise for improving student course and program completion success rates.

For new students, especially community college students, the transition into college can be challenging. The new computerized assessment is a vast improvement over the paper-pencil tests because it simplifies the process for new students, allows for timely retesting, and provides immediate placement information to both students and counselors. This is a technology that can continue to improve the delivery of student services. In the near future, the program will be able to immediately identify if students could benefit from special programs like Puente or EOPS. As the diagnostic program is developed, it could also improve success in basic skills by assisting students to self-remediate specific skills required to place into higher level courses.

Relationship to Accreditation Standards

Standard 3:

The institution researches and identifies the learning support needs of its student population and provides appropriate services and programs to address those needs.

*a. The institution assures equitable access to all of its students by providing appropriate, comprehensive, and reliable services to students regardless of service location or delivery method.
...e. The institution regularly evaluates admissions and placement instruments and practices to validate their effectiveness while minimizing biases.*

The new computerized testing allows for much more flexible testing. Testing can now be given at all of our large feeder high schools as well as the smaller continuation high schools and schools outside our service area. Our testing office can give any high school site a temporary login and password so they can administer the test to any student who could benefit at time convenient to the student and their proctor/staff. We can also administer the test to individual students at any time if they are unable to attend a regularly scheduled test session, or need to be testing by DSPS in a special testing environment.

Accessible and timely placement testing is one of the keys to a comprehensive and student-friendly matriculation process. Together with the development of the online application process and online registration process, the new online placement testing has made it possible to streamline the entire matriculation process and to complete testing, orientation, counseling and registration in a single session. The combine ESL testing, orientation, advising and registration sessions are an example of this.

On-going research is being conducted to ensure the validity of the test. The ESL, English and math committees are continuing to meet to ensure that basic skills faculty are playing a leading role.

Relationship to Accreditation Themes

Institutional Commitments

The standards ask institutions to make a commitment in action to providing high quality education congruent with institutional mission.

The effort to improve the placement testing process was successful only because there was a strong commitment from all the key components of the institution to implement this change. There was a significant financial cost needed to implement the new placement testing systems. This cost included the purchase of 32 computer stations, the cost of the annual licensing and the testing units and well as the cost of the faculty and IT staff needed for the initial set up and the on-going evaluation, validation and improvement of the system. However, the college, from the President and the administration to the faculty and staff, supported the change and supported the allocation of money and staff time necessary.

Evaluation, Planning, and Improvement

The standards require ongoing institutional evaluation and improvement to help serve students better. Evaluation focuses on student achievement, student learning, and the effectiveness of processes, policies, and organization.

The impetus to improving the placement testing process stemmed from the *College Goal #4: High standards in our constant pursuit of excellence*. The old paper-pencil test was a barrier to simplifying and improving the matriculation process for new students. Addressing this problem was an important step to improving the placement, registration and counseling services for new students, and to improve the success rates for students enrolled in our basic skills courses.