

Transcription

California Community Colleges
Podcast on Guided Pathways

Episode #4

Eloy: Hi. I'm Eloy Oakley, and welcome to another podcast brought to you by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. I'm joined once again by Hans Johnson, the Director of the Higher Education Center at the Public Policy Institute of California or PPIC. He's also a Senior Fellow there. And we had Hans on last time, and the discussion was so rich and important that we've asked him back again. Thanks for coming back, Hans.

Hans: My pleasure to be here again.

Eloy: So in today's podcast, you know, I wanna spend some time on the research and policy discussions around assessment for placement and academic preparation. We talked a little bit about that in our last podcast, especially as it relates to determining the most appropriate math course that directly relates to the intended program of study as well as some of the other measures. And we're seeing increasingly that for most students, you know, Algebra is not always the best route to go. Let's first start with assessment and placement policy.

So in the California Community Colleges and really throughout the nation, colleges have relied pretty heavily on standardized placement exams to assess where a student should be placed once they get to college. Even if they came right out of high school, even if they got A's or B's in Math courses, we tended to put them through standardized placement exams. What has been the impact of that practice in your view?

Hans: So the impact of that practice has been to place very large numbers of students—by our estimation, about 80% of incoming students in California's community colleges—into remedial courses rather than college-level courses. And that wouldn't be problematic if the students really benefited from those courses and were able to make it through those remedial pathways to college-level courses, but they don't. It's especially problematic though when we look at what are the primary determinants of whether a student succeeds in college. And we know—there's a wealth of literature on this—that the best indicator of how you're going to do in college is, guess what, how you did in high school. It's the grades and the courses you earned in high school that are the best predictor.

So moving away from a single placement exam, which, by the way, many times students don't even know that it's a high-stakes exam. It's a single measure versus the multitude of measures you have when you

have grade-point grades and courses from high school. Moving away from that is the right thing to do, especially when you have such a better measure. And as you know yourself, Chancellor, when you were at Long Beach City College, moving towards using other measures will actually reduce significantly the number of students who are placed in remediation.

And I would finally add, I think it's important to think about this from the student perspective. First of all, we don't even know how many students are so discouraged by their placement that they decide not even to enroll. But imagine you're a student who took Algebra or Algebra II and passed it, earned an A or a B in high school, and now, from the single placement exam, you're told you have to start three levels below college courses in Math. That's tremendously discouraging. And even if you decide to show up and you start taking this course and the material that you've already covered, it's no wonder that so few students actually make it through that process.

Eloy: So given that, and certainly it's...as I reflect on my experience at Long Beach City College, we found that a significant number of students who were placed in remediation should have never been placed there to begin with. But if we step back, what types of students do you think we're impacting the most?

Hans: Well, we know this. We did the analysis, and it turns out that it is the very students that we need to be reaching in higher education to ensure that, as we talked about last time, higher education still serves as a ladder of economic and social mobility. And in particular, in California, Latinos and African American students are more likely to be placed in remediation than Asian and White Students.

The numbers, again, are very large. As you know, the community colleges serve a tremendously diverse population. And to effectively serve that population, right out of the gate, you need to make sure that you're serving students by first of all, placing them where they're going to benefit the most. And we, at PPIC, have been doing work looking at this issue. We've identified remediation as one of the biggest obstacles to student success in our state, and we're excited by these changes. And we've done some other work looking at ways to deliver remedial education maybe more effectively as well.

Eloy: Now, you recently published a report on this very topic. Where would our listeners need to go to look at some of these reports?

Hans: So if they go to PPIC's website, www.ppic.org, and look at our Higher Education Center page, you'll see all the work that we've done in higher education, including we've...the work we have done looking at assessment and placement practices in the community colleges, and work we have done looking at students' pathways who are placed in remediation and what the outcomes are like for those students. And in about a month, we have a new report that will be out that looks at Statistics pathways and other alternative pathways of delivering remediation in Math.

Eloy: And PPIC, although, you know, you're doing great work, is not the only organization across the country looking at this issue. I know in my experience, the Community College Research Center at Columbia University has done some great work. How do your findings match up with the work that they're doing at CCRC?

Hans: So our findings match up very well with CCRC. And, in fact, my colleague, Olga Rodriguez, used to work at CCRC, and we have frequent meetings with them. They have been doing work in other states as well as now doing some work in California. And what's exciting about some of the results that we are finding is that it complements their findings in other states. And in some ways, the findings that we have for California are even more robust. That is, for example, in the Statistics pathway, and the exact numbers will be in the report, but we're finding students are more likely to even end up transferring if they have gone through the Statistics pathway rather than through the traditional Math pathway.

And those findings are, I wouldn't say unique to California, but they're stronger here than elsewhere. So making these reforms in California matters more than anywhere else. We're the biggest state, but it also seems that we're, at least, in these baby steps right now, doing some good things.

Eloy: Well, we hope to take bigger steps in the near future. And I know our colleges are keenly looking at many of these reforms, having a lot of professional development for their faculty, and I think we'll see some important results coming in the near future. So if we think about what's happening in community colleges, and given the fact that our largest feeder system for transfer students is the California State University system, are there similar things happening at the CSU? And if there are, is there work being done at the CSU to link this work together to ensure

that we're not repeating the same mistakes at the different levels of higher education when our students transfer?

Hans: Yeah. So the California State University has embarked on some ambitious new initiatives to improve student outcomes as well. One of those is to eliminate remediation. And so instead of placing students into remedial courses, they will offer supports for those students, either corequisite courses while they're taking the college-level courses in English or Math, or offering some other sort of support—for example, tutoring centers and services—so that their plan is to completely eliminate remediation, which is a pretty major and also a very ambitious goal. And it very much coincides with where the community colleges are moving with respect to trying to reduce the number of students who are in remediation.

The California State University system is also embarking on a very ambitious graduation initiative to improve their graduation rates from less than 60% of students graduating in six years right now to over 70%, and to completely eliminating gaps between different groups of students socioeconomically and ethnically. Very exciting goals, and I think very consistent with the goals of the community colleges.

Having said that, there are always articulation issues. There are always some challenges. And again, I think for me, when I think about it from a student perspective, that's where you really kind of get a vision for how we might improve some of those transitions. So a student who often thinks that they have done everything they needed to do in a community college to be transfer-eligible will then find out that, oh, at UC Berkeley, that course didn't count, whereas at UC San Diego, it did. There are still some kind of basic things where we could do and need to do a better job at making that transition from community college to four-year colleges smoother. Associate degree for transfer is a step in the right direction as well, but let's be clear, that's far from universal. It's dependent on community colleges working with specific, in this case, California State University partners, and UC might or might not be completely going along with that.

So, again, a lot of steps in the right direction, ambitious goals, and I think, as you said, the challenge is gonna be scaling this. And I know you have plans for scaling, and I know CSU does, and UC does as well. Time to degree as well as whether or not students even finish are big issues going on there.

Eloy: Well, you mentioned something that's very important that perhaps in the community colleges or in our higher education institutions we haven't always taken to heart, which is designing our programs, our curriculum, our student experience with the student in mind. And so I think the more that we can do that, and certainly this will be an issue that we're focused on in community colleges, putting the student at the center of that design proposition. So I'm hopeful and confident that our colleagues in the CSU and UC will join us in that endeavor.

So given your work around remediation around multiple measures, when we talk about placement...and this goes, again, to the issue of placement. When we talk about multiple measures, what does that mean to you? And what kind of measures should we be looking at?

Hans: To me, multiple measures, more than anything, means looking at high school grades and high school courses. There are multiple measures in there. There are all the courses you took. There are all the grades you earned. But it includes other kinds of activities that students have been engaged in. And again, remembering we're thinking about this for academic placement in courses, so other items... Like many students in high school take community college courses. That should be another measure that's used, how did they do in those courses they have already taken. Many students in high school take advanced placement courses, which are college-level material that they're taking in high school. That should be another measure. Of course, there are the college entrance exams that, again, many high school students take. That's yet another measure. And then finally, we also have the Smarter Balanced tests in California, which are given to students in high school that are designed now to include a component for those who are in 11th grade, whether or not they are college-ready or near-college-ready. And that's yet another measure that could be used.

But as you can tell, I'm a big fan of the students' high school grades and courses, but all those other measures I think are useful. And from my perspective, the point of view of placement should be what do we see from this student academically that identifies them as college-ready. And for me, that's then an either/or proposition then that they have to meet all of the above. If they have met some of the above, I think I would be persuaded that we should give them a shot at seeing how they're gonna do in college-level courses.

Eloy: Well, that's great, a great background and great thinking. And I think many of our colleges are doing exactly that, looking at this issue of

what data can they gather to give them a better perspective of how well a student can succeed in a particular college course. So we've talked about multiple measures of placement, we've talked about remediation, and we've talked about creating alternative Math pathways. In your work, is there anything else that's in that basket that we should be focused on to get more students into and through community college with a credential?

Hans: Well, and this is a question I'm gonna pose to you now, so we're gonna turn the tables here.

Eloy: Okay.

Hans: But I know that the community colleges have been working to develop a guided pathways initiative. It's something that we at PPIC... And I'll do the researcher voice here because we're...at the end of the day, we're policy researchers at my institute. We're very eager and have been partners with the community colleges in identifying what works. And there are a lot of innovations. And look, some of them will work and some won't, and the guided pathways is a new initiative that we're very excited about. The CCRC has done some work that suggests it's pretty effective. We'd love to be partners with you going forward, looking at how it gets rolled out and how it works in California. But I think it's important for the listeners of the podcast to know that that is a huge initiative and is designed to address some of the issues you were talking about.

Eloy: Well, you're exactly right. It is the major initiative in our strategic vision. It's really about creating very clear and structured pathways for students. It's about using data to inform everything from scheduling to what wraparound services we give students. So it is a major initiative. We're very hopeful. We agree with you that the evidence we have seen across the country is very positive. Everywhere from Valencia College to Georgia State to all parts of America where this has been tried, it's resulted in some very positive outcomes and closed achievement gaps. So we're committed to rolling this out, and, you know, we'd love to continue to work with you and PPIC and the great work that you do and lean on you for support. We cannot achieve our strategic vision goals without the support of everyone in California. I hope that you continue to delve into these questions, and we will continue to rely on your expertise.

So we have been talking with Hans Johnson from the Public Policy

Institute of California. It's been great to have you, Hans, and I appreciate you coming back and talking to us again, and we look forward to working with you and talking to you again in the future.

Hans: Thanks so much.

Eloy: Thank you for listening to another podcast from the California Community Colleges, and we will be back to you soon. Thanks for listening.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges Podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.