

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Chief Academic Officers  
From: Vita Rabinowitz  
Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost  
Subject: New Placement Policies for Developmental Education at CUNY  
Date: September 23, 2016

As you know, last fall I convened a CUNY task force to review the University's policies and practices related to developmental education. In June, the CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education issued a set of recommendations that I have accepted and that will shape CUNY's reform agenda going forward. One area of great concern, and a focus of the deliberations of the Task Force, is the placement of students into developmental instruction. This memo provides details of our reform initiative in this area.

The recommendations of the Task Force regarding placement have been shaped by the following conclusions based on converging research evidence, a growing consensus on effective practices, and a strong commitment to CUNY's mission of excellence and access:

1. Assignment of students to developmental education in and of itself too often has unintended negative side effects. It convinces many students that they are not college material, dissuading some from enrolling in college at the outset and convincing too many who do enroll that college is not for them. Developmental placements also have financial consequences for students, consuming precious financial and personal resources in course work that does not count directly toward degree requirements. Finally, research conducted nationally and here at CUNY indicates that developmental instruction confers no discernible academic benefit on students who place into it with scores relatively close to the cut point.
2. Research has shown that college readiness cannot be measured adequately on the basis of tests alone, and that by taking into account high school grades we can improve our ability to identify those students who can succeed in basic credit-bearing course work at CUNY. However, all placement algorithms are subject to imprecision, placing some students into developmental course work who could have succeeded in credit courses and placing other students into credit courses when they could have benefited from developmental instruction first. From this research, and other work indicating that many students formerly assigned to developmental education can succeed in credit courses if properly supported, we conclude that CUNY should "err" on the side of giving students access to

credit-bearing courses, with academic resources adequate to maximize their chances for success. Moreover, CUNY should reduce its reliance on high-stakes tests and instead use multiple measures including tests and high school grades to place students.

Given the negative consequences of being assigned to developmental education and the difficulties associated with placing students accurately, the Task Force concluded that CUNY should redesign its placement procedures so as to afford students the greatest possible opportunity to demonstrate their ability to succeed in credit-bearing course work.

### **Plans for Improving Placement**

#### ***Use High School Grades to Improve Placement Accuracy***

During the coming year, my office will conclude its program of research to identify the best means of incorporating grades into our placement methodology. Once this work has been completed we will collaborate with CIS and the Office of Admission Services to implement the changes as quickly as possible (at the latest, for the spring 2018 admission cycle), in concert with the implementation of CUNY's new admission system. We are confident that by taking into account students' overall record in high school and specifically in relevant college-preparatory course work, we can more accurately identify students who can successfully begin their academic career in freshman composition and in credit-bearing math courses. In the meantime, we will continue to employ multiple indicators to place students, including the New York State Regents test scores, the new SAT, the ACT, as well as ACCUPLACER for assessing reading and mathematics skills and the CAT-W for writing.

#### ***Better Support the Needs of Returning Students***

The Task Force began but did not fully complete a discussion of the special circumstances of adult and returning students, a key constituency for CUNY, whose measured abilities in basic skills may significantly underestimate their true potential given their time away from the classroom. Preliminary consideration of these issues led to the following recommendation, which I embrace:

- In time for the fall 2017 admission cycle, CUNY will revisit placement criteria and support services for students who have been away from their high school and/or previous collegiate studies for some time, especially in math.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A 2008 policy issued by the Office of Academic Affairs allowed students to enroll in bachelor's programs in Worker Education programs without fully meeting skill proficiency requirements so long as these students met the regular requirements by the 24th credit. The CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education will revisit this approach with an eye to broadening it during its deliberations in the coming academic year.

### ***Improve Preparation for CUNY's Assessment Tests***

Too often, prospective students arrive for their placement testing appointment unfamiliar with the tests they are about to take and the potential implications of these tests for their academic career at CUNY. Approximately 4 in 10 students entering testing sessions last fall had not reviewed any of the extensive test preparation material available on CUNY's testing website. To improve support for potential applicants, CUNY will make more information available earlier to students, teachers, parents, and school staff. CUNY must revisit the timing and extent of its communications to students and enhance the availability of test preparation opportunities. To this end, in time for the spring 2017 admission cycle, we will:

- 1) Provide applicants with more information about placement tests and their consequences as early as possible so that prospective students may prepare for them. Students should have information about the content and format of the tests and access to practice exams at a minimum several weeks before they sit for the tests and preferably while they are still in high school.
- 2) Provide more resources for preparation, in particular for the ACCUPLACER tests to be administered to applicants for spring 2017 admission. New test preparation opportunities will include online instructional materials.
- 3) Continue CUNY's piloting of "mindset" exercises—for example, primes designed to set expectations appropriately and instill confidence and resilience during test taking and beyond.

### **Placement Algorithms**

Our reform initiative has been shaped by some practical considerations. The landscape of testing instruments that CUNY has been employing to place students has been altered dramatically. For many years, CUNY has relied on New York State's Regents examinations and the SAT or ACT to make an initial determination of basic skill proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics. In the past several years, however, the New York State Education Department has rewritten the Regents examinations in English Language Arts, Algebra 1, Geometry and Algebra 2 to reflect the Common Core state standards, and in so doing has altered the scaling of these tests, necessitating new cut points. In addition, this spring the College Board introduced a re-engineered SAT measuring new skills with new scales. CUNY has also been administering assessment tests both to determine basic proficiency and to help math departments place students into the spectrum of credit-bearing mathematics courses. CUNY has administered the Compass assessment suite, published by the ACT Corporation, to test students in reading and math, and its own test, the CAT-W, to assess writing skills. Last year ACT announced that it will discontinue the use of Compass, effective October 2016. As an alternative, the University selected the College Board's ACCUPLACER as a tool for assessing readiness in mathematics and reading. Finally, even ACCUPLACER is in transition. The College Board, which develops

ACCUPLACER, has just released a revised version of that test, further complicating the task of implementing new scoring algorithms.

In order to set cut points on ACCUPLACER, OIRA's Office of Policy Research engaged in a year-long study employing multiple methods, including correlation of test scores with course grades and a comparison of the performance of students on the new tests with their performance on the previous tests. In the section to follow, we provide information on the cut points on all of the new tests. As we gain experience with the new tests, we will reassess these standards.

### ***Mathematics***

Effective for Spring 2017 admissions we will introduce the following changes in the criteria that CUNY uses to assess basic skill proficiency in mathematics.

- 1) Students who score **70** or higher on the **New York State Regents examinations** in Algebra 1 or Geometry, or **65** or higher on the Algebra 2 exam will be considered proficient in mathematics. (A score of 70 equates in percentile terms to a score of approximately 80—CUNY's proficiency standard on the previously administered Integrated Algebra and Geometry exams.) Students will no longer have to pass the Algebra 2 course in order to qualify as proficient.
- 2) Students who score **530** or higher on the **new SAT in mathematics** will be considered proficient in mathematics. According to guidance from the College Board, a 530 is concordant with a score of 500 on the earlier version of the SAT mathematics test—CUNY's previous proficiency standard. Students who earn a 530 or better are considered college ready by the College Board.
- 3) Drawing on our pilot administration of ACCUPLACER last fall and on subsequent research correlating test scores with grades in entry-level credit courses in mathematics, we will introduce an important change into mathematics placement testing at CUNY. In the past, CUNY employed two Compass test modules to assign two levels of mathematics placement: one to determine whether a student was proficient (prepared for credit courses) or belonged in elementary algebra, and a second to determine whether the student should begin in elementary algebra or arithmetic. Based on our findings from last fall's pilot as well as a thorough review of the topics tested by the Arithmetic and Elementary Algebra modules, we will set two cut points on just one of the ACCUPLACER modules—Elementary Algebra— rather than separate cut points on Arithmetic and Elementary Algebra.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Significant differences in content between Compass and ACCUPLACER support this decision. The Compass Algebra exam contains elementary algebra and intermediate algebra content, with little to no pre-algebra and arithmetic. The ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra exam contains elementary algebra (with little to no intermediate algebra), along with pre-algebra and arithmetic at the lower end. The ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra exam is adaptive, meaning that students who show insufficient elementary algebra knowledge are routed to lower-level questions including basic arithmetic questions, some of which are in an algebraic context. For example, a student might be asked to order signed numbers, pick the smallest/largest fraction, compute absolute value, reduce



- a. Currently, students who meet a threshold on the Compass Algebra (M2) subtest are deemed math proficient and are eligible to take at least one credit-bearing mathematics course. We have established a parallel cut point on ACCUPLACER. Students scoring a 57 or higher on ACCUPLACER's Elementary Algebra exam will be permitted to take a credit-bearing mathematics course. Based on data generated in the pilot, we project a pass rate of 64% in typical entry-level credit-bearing math courses for students who score 57. The current overall pass rate in entry-level math classes for CUNY non-exempt freshmen is 66%.
- b. For placement into lower versus top-level developmental courses (e.g., arithmetic versus elementary algebra), we are setting a second, lower cut point on the Elementary Algebra module. Currently, students who perform poorly on the Algebra module of Compass are routed to an arithmetic test (Numerical Skills/Pre-algebra), and it is their performance on that test that determines the level of developmental math to which they are assigned. As part of the pilot, we analyzed results from both the ACCUPLACER Arithmetic and Elementary Algebra modules and found that scores on the Elementary Algebra module have considerably higher correlations with performance in the elementary algebra course than do scores on the Arithmetic exam. Drawing on this research, we are establishing a cut point of 40 on the ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra module. Students who score 40 or higher (but lower than 57) will be eligible to enroll in a top-level developmental mathematics course (such as elementary algebra or an alternative course preparing students for quantitative reasoning or statistics). These students will be deemed proficient in pre-algebra topics and arithmetic and therefore ready for elementary algebra or an alternative. Students who score 39 or below may be placed into a course or other intervention that provides instruction to prepare students for the next-level course in an efficient manner.
- c. We will employ the ACCUPLACER College-Level Math module to assist departments in placing students into credit-bearing math courses. As in the past, departments can use placement test scores along with other information that they consider appropriate to determine the degree to which students are prepared for credit courses beyond the entry-level mathematics. However, students who are deemed proficient based on their SAT/ACT scores and/or the Regents examinations must be eligible to register for at least one credit-bearing course.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Reading***

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a fraction, perform the order of operations, evaluate an algebraic expression, perform arithmetic with fractions potentially including a variable, etc. Most of these questions must be answered without a calculator.

<sup>3</sup> The ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra module should not be used for this purpose because, unlike the Compass Algebra module, it contains very little intermediate algebra content. Therefore, students who qualify as math proficient based on their Regents or SAT score will take the ACCUPLACER College Level Math module to be placed into credit-bearing math courses beyond the entry level.

CUNY will continue to place students into and out of developmental education in reading on the basis of the SAT or ACT, the New York State English Regents, and a CUNY assessment test. Students who are not reading proficient based on the SAT/ACT or the Regents exam will be given the assessment test. In the past, CUNY has relied on the Compass Reading module, but as previously noted, that test will be discontinued by ACT, so CUNY will administer ACCUPLACER instead.

- 1) The proficiency cut point on the **Regents English Language Arts exam will remain 75**. (Equi-percentile data suggest that the scaling of the Common Core Regents exam is similar to that of the previous Comprehensive English Regents exam.)
- 2) However, differences between the earlier SAT and the new one introduced in March 2016 necessitate a change. CUNY will adopt the College Board's college readiness benchmark of **480 on the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing section score**. This score reflects combined performance on two separate components of the SAT, Reading and Writing and Language. The ACT equivalent will remain 20 or higher on the ACT English exam.
- 3) Last fall, we administered the ACCUPLACER reading module to a sample of students registered in freshman composition, developmental reading and ESL courses and correlated test scores with performance in these courses. Based on this study, **we have set the ACCUPLACER reading cut point at 55**: students must earn a 55 or higher on the ACCUPLACER Reading test for exemption from developmental reading. For students at this score point, our pilot models predict an 89% chance of passing freshman composition. A higher cut point would place significantly more students into developmental education than are assigned there now, with little projected improvement in the already-high rate of success in freshman composition.

### ***Writing***

We will exempt students from developmental writing using the same Regents and SAT/ACT criteria as those defining reading proficiency:

- 1) **75** or better on the Regents English Language Arts exam or
- 2) **480** or higher on the Evidence-based Reading and Writing section (20 or higher on the ACT English) or
- 3) A score of **56** or higher on the CAT-W.

There will be no change in CUNY policy requiring students to demonstrate proficiency in both reading and writing in order to register for freshman composition. However, the Office of Academic Affairs continues to strongly encourage colleges to offer co-requisite instruction to students who are proficient in either reading or writing, but not both (freshman composition with supplemental support).

### ***Retesting***

Effective for the spring 2017 admission cycle, we will automatically grant all students who score close to the cut point on the ACCUPLACER Reading and Elementary Algebra placement tests the opportunity to take the test again within 10 days before making a final placement decision.

Specifically, students who score 45 or higher on reading but below the cut point of 55 will be eligible for an automatic retake. Likewise, students who score 50 or higher on ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra but below the cut point of 57 will be granted an opportunity to retake.<sup>4</sup> We recommend that students who are eligible for a retest prepare for the test using preparation materials available through their college and the CUNY testing website ([www.cuny.edu/testing](http://www.cuny.edu/testing)). There will be no requirement defining the amount of preparation required before the retake.

Please note that for returning students and those who have deferred their admission, CUNY will honor their proficiency status based on the standards in place during the student's initial admission to the University.

I look forward to working with you and with your faculty to reform and improve developmental education at CUNY. I am confident that if we can pursue our reform agenda with urgency and focus, we can better prepare our students for academic success at CUNY. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me.

cc: Dean David Crook  
Dean Lucinda Zoe  
Sr. University Dean Robert Ptachik  
Mathematics Discipline Council  
Reading Discipline Council  
Writing Discipline Council  
English Discipline Council  
Directors of Testing  
Members of the CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education  
Council of Registrars  
Directors of Admission

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<sup>4</sup> We will not offer an automatic retake in writing because of the time required to score the CAT-W and the availability of appeal for writing, an option that is not available for reading or math.

***Summary of Cut Points on CUNY's Proficiency Markers for Mathematics, Reading and Writing, Effective for Spring 2017 Admission***

<b>Placement</b>	<b>New Cut Point</b>	<b>Automatic Retest</b>	<b>Previous Cut Point</b>
Basic proficiency/Entry-level credit courses in mathematics Basic proficiency/Entry-level credit courses in mathematics Entry-level credit courses in mathematics	SAT math greater than or equal to (ge) 530	NA	SAT math ge 500
	Common Core NYS Regents: Algebra 1, or Geometry: ge 70 or Algebra 2: ge 65	NA	Ge 80 any math Regents <b>and</b> pass Algebra 2 high school course
	Accuplacer Elementary Algebra ge 57	50-56	Compass Algebra ge 40
Elementary algebra or alternative pathway	Accuplacer Elementary Algebra 40 to 56	NA	Compass Numerical Skills Pre-algebra ge 45
Basic proficiency reading and writing/Freshman Composition*	SAT Evidence-based Reading & Writing ge 480	NA	SAT critical reading ge 480
	NYS ELA Regents Exam ge 75	NA	ELA Regents ge 75
	Accuplacer Reading ge 55	45-54	Compass Reading ge 70
	CAT-W ge 56	NA	CAT-W ge 56
* Proficiency in both reading and writing ordinarily are required to register for freshman composition. However OAA strongly encourages the colleges to adopt the co-requisite model, in which students who are not proficient in one of these two skills may be mainstreamed into freshman composition with supplementary support.			