Second Meeting of Exploratory Committee for Mandatory Placement of Students in Writing Courses

Time: March 27, 2015  3:30-5:00 PM

Location: Building 2, Room 1 on the Ankeny Campus


Joe DeHart started the meeting by presenting us with two handouts relevant to the request for information from our last meeting (see file in this email). The first chart shows the retention rate (didn’t drop course), the pass rate (D-), and the success rate (C- or above). These statistics were further broken out into traditional courses, web enhanced courses, web blended courses, and totally online courses. The success rates for Comp I are approximately the same for traditional classroom and web-blended at 63% while the success rate for web blended (50%) and fully online (59%) were slightly less. Interestingly, these rates are basically comparable to the success rates for psychology and sociology classes. Also of note is the fact that students who take Comp I who have already taken 48 credits or more are more successful than those who take Comp I with fewer than 24 credits. Joe DeHart speculates that this is the case because students who are not going to be successful have disappeared before having completed 48 credits.

The second handout provided by Joe DeHart shows the responses from the non-mandatory dropped course survey that seeks information on why students are dropping a class. The five most prominent traits for all course levels in the English Department in Fall 2014 were doing poorly (36%), difficulty of course – as in course was too difficult (33%), fell behind (33%), working (38%), and course was not what I expected (34%).

Joe DeHart spoke of his research that shows that Compass scores were not a predictor of success. He finds difficulty with all one-shot placement tests (ACT, Accuplacer, etc.). He felt that the biggest predictor of academic success is prior academic success. While we have student high school GPAs available from when the students apply, they are buried in layers not easily accessed by the advisors (along with the fact that most students don’t see an advisor).

Some additional problems with Compass as seen expressed by Kari Hensen are that the students are not taking the required Compass test seriously. In a follow-up question, it was established that the Compass test does, like ALEXS, present sequential skills to students and stops feeding questions after the students give a series of incorrect answers at that level. Other problems, at present, are that only full-time students are required to take Compass test (3 to 4 thousand only, approximately 17,000 are not full-time regular students) and 70% of our students register in the two weeks before classes start presenting great difficulty in terms of getting everyone to take the Compass test.
A question was raised regarding where the cut off scores for ACT and Compass came from. It was established the each school can set its cut off scores, but we don’t have a recorded history of why these particular scores were chosen at DMACC.

A question was raised as to how we want to proceed in light of the lack of reliability of placement tests and the attendant difficulties in administering them. Do we want to turn on pre-requisites in Banner and enforce them as a means of addressing placement issues?

We also spent some time talking about the virtues of ALEKS which is being used by the Math Department as a placement instrument because it has remediation component which students can work on their own with additional instruction provided by ALEKS and then retest. And, it was mentioned that the Math Department has revised their developmental courses based on the specific information they are getting from ALEKS and are working to generate several options for math remediation, including a math boot camp before a class starts. This led to a discussion of the English Department’s need to, in conjunction with mandatory placement, provide remedial support in a variety of ways to ensure that students don’t just go away because they are told they aren’t ready for a particular level of writing class. Options mentioned were learning communities where writing is directly related to course content,* stretch courses (Comp I taken over two semesters rather than 1), and co-courses (students taking Comp I and a developmental or lower level writing course like English 104, the latter right after the former so students can continue to work on their writing skills with their writing instructor).

*Sharon Bitter reported on the success of pairing a reading course with an academic course to help students develop reading skills within a genuine academic context.

The notion of need for a variety of remediation opportunities was reinforced by Sharon Bittner’s research that often students in developmental courses don’t progress when they reach even beginning level courses like Comp I in large part due to a lack of sustained support.

A question raised in our meeting was “what is the definition of developmental writing versus being ready for Composition I?” If we’re going to make the assertion that you must have mastered certain skills to get into Comp I and we’re going to have a placement mechanism to make sure that you have mastered these skills, then we need to make sure we know precisely what we are looking for. Options to go by are the English 061 competencies and/or the ACT definition of college writing readiness characteristics brought to our meeting by Darwin Pagan, who showed the definitions from the Ready to Succeed: All Students Prepared for College and Work brochure at http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/ready_to_succeed.pdf. (Also, see attached files Writing Standards 1 and Writing Standards 2)

Briefly mentioned was the notion of self-assessment. Several years ago with the Title 3 grant, a skill rubric was used by advisors to guide students in making a wise choice in terms of which writing course to go into. This practice didn’t last long enough for conclusive results on its effectiveness.

Several issues regarding ESL students and placement were also raised. The first one involved trying to determine who set the cut score for the different ESL courses and how one could go about getting these
changed. It was mentioned that this cut-score issue needs to be taken up with the Academic Standards Committee. Also discussed was the issue that students self-identify if they are native or non-native speakers. This makes it difficult to reinforce placement in ESL courses when needed because self-identified English speakers can’t be forced into an ESL course. Katie mentioned that she has the most success when she does one-on-one advising with her students, helping them to determine the appropriate course pathways to take.

Lynn LaGrone and Shannon McGregor mentioned the success findings for concurrent courses, also known as Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP), where students who are borderline in their COMPASS/ACT scores can take Composition I along with a support class to scaffold and practice the skills the students are learning in Composition I. “Video 2: What Is ALP?” and “Video 3: What Are the Results?” at http://alp-deved.org/powerpoint-on-alp/ offer a clear explanation from Peter Adams, who taught ALP courses and started the research at the Community College of Baltimore County in the 1990s. The ALP course is separate and meets immediately after Composition I, and it has its own assignments, readings, and writing assignments, but its purpose is to support the teaching in Composition I directly. While Adams suggests having the same instructor to comfort and provide continuity in instruction for the students, he also said he was backing away from that requirement in the case that the Composition I instructor and the support instructor collaborate with the content and work closely with students while drafting. DMACC has an ALP course in RDG 049, which aids students with reading skills in classes such as psychology, bio-science, and history, and the students bring their texts, resources, and notes, and the instructor helps them improve their reading skills, annotation skills, connections to the material, and study skills. The English Department could create a new ENG ALP course, or it could revise ENG 104 into an ALP course. The major problems with this as an option are advertising and scheduling, so working with advisors and with the scheduling department is crucial as this process is developed. Lynn LaGrone and Shannon McGregor are willing to work on creating an ALP class if the committee agrees.

Here is additional information found in CCRC that analyzes four systems of ALP options provided by Shannon.


It’s a part of a larger study, Developing Meaningful Developmental Reform, located at http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/designing-meaningful-developmental-reform.html. You are welcome to add that into the notes, too.

After some discussion, our thoughts were that while we fully recognize that there is no perfect (maybe even half-perfect) placement mechanism, some placement mechanism at DMACC was preferable to none. It was at the point that Kari Hansen showed us Iowa Central’s approach to placement which involves having cut-scores for a variety of instruments (Accuplacer, Compass, ACT, etc.). Students, then,
are presented with options for providing scores for any of these instruments and placed according to the cut score for that instrument.

As we were ending the meeting, we determined that our next step was to do research on the mandatory placement instruments now in place in 11 of Iowa’s 15 community colleges. Judy Hauser volunteered to do some asking around at the Iowa English Roundtable on the Monday following our meeting and report back to our group.

We left the date of the next meeting to be determined.

Respectfully submitted,

Judy Hauser

Thanks for Shannon McGregor for additional information.

Please send any corrections of these minutes to Judy Hauser at jahauser@dmacc.edu.