

Student Success Task Force Recommendations  
Response from AWE (Assessment of Written English) Facilitators  
Mt. San Antonio College

Mt. San Antonio College developed our writing placement test, the AWE, with Title 3 money more than a decade ago because the commercially available, off-the-shelf, multiple choice Asset test did not accurately place students into our courses. Faculty from English, American Language, English as a Second Language, and Learning Assistance worked together to create a placement test that would place students into courses in which they would most likely to be successful. The placement test is not multiple choice. Students write. The test is not scored by computer. Faculty from English, American Language, English as a Second Language, and Learning Assistance norm, read, and place papers on an ongoing, year round basis. We read and place more than 14,000 placement tests each year. Mt. San Antonio College students, faculty, and AWE Facilitators are happy with our writing placement. We have consistently high student and teacher satisfaction rates, ranging from 85% to 100% satisfaction with placement into the student's first writing class. Our placement test works for our students and the unique community our college serves.

Each of California's 112 community colleges draws from communities that have unique populations of students who walk in the door with various skills and needs, and if the expertise of professors who have been working with these students is replaced by a one-size-fits-all, generic placement test, the "community" college will cease to exist. A placement tool must be appropriate for the students being placed. Student populations are different, which is why the placement tests must be appropriate for each college. Our academic freedom as instructors allows us to determine what is best for our students, and if this is replaced by a common placement that does not appropriately place students, the students will suffer and colleges will be blamed for failing our students.

Community college placement tests are being criticized for lack of portability and efficiency, but portability and efficiency aren't more important than accurate placement into courses. We don't want students to be inappropriately placed, fail their courses, and then have to repeat the courses or drop out because they think they don't belong. We don't want students to have to move from college to college, picking and choosing their courses piecemeal because they can't get the classes they need at the college where they started. What would benefit students is to have enough sections offered so that students can enroll in the courses they need at the college of their choice. What would benefit students is enough financial aid. What would benefit students is to feel at home in a community college, to have the time to grow and learn in that community. Education money should go toward making more classes available, offering financial aid to needy students, and funding student support services such as tutoring and learning assistance centers—the kind of student support whose funding has been slashed in the past few years, not to lining the pockets of testing companies.

The cost of the AWE is significantly less than that of currently commercially available off-the-shelf placement tests. The average cost for students to take the writing, math, and reading placements at Mt. San Antonio College is \$1.70. The cost for students to take placement tests through Accuplacer is \$10.00. It does not make sense to give up a locally developed and validated placement test that accurately places students in courses where they are most likely to be successful, results in high teacher and student satisfaction rates, and costs significantly less than a commercially available test.

Common placement is not possible without common cutoff scores and common courses. Can common textbooks, test banks, and SLOs be far behind? Such a move looks remarkably like the failed No Child Left Behind. What makes our community colleges vibrant is that they meet the needs of their unique communities. To continue meeting the needs of our unique populations of students, we need the freedom to design our own courses, programs, and placement tests.

There are many benefits to such a writing placement, beyond proper placement. Participating in the AWE as a reader is a unique opportunity to work together with faculty from different departments: American Language, English, English as a Second Language, and Learning Assistance, all of whom offer writing courses. Rarely are there opportunities for faculty to work together across departments on a year round, ongoing basis toward the common goal of appropriate placement of students into our writing courses. This collaboration not only results in students being placed into classes where they are most likely to be successful, but it provides faculty with the opportunity to better understand the range of writing courses offered on our campus.

We believe the AWE is a model of a successful, locally developed and validated writing placement test. There is no doubt that the AWE benefits students, faculty, programs, and the communities we serve. We do not support a mandated common placement test.

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