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2015-01-06

Learning from the Ground Up (Policy Brief): Developmental Education Reform at Florida College System Institutions

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POLICY BRIEF

Learning from the Ground Up:

Developmental Education Reform at Florida College System Institutions

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Under Florida Senate Bill 1720 (SB 1720), passed in 2013, institutions in the Florida College System (FCS) were required to implement comprehensive developmental education reform by fall 2014. The reform exempted recent graduates from Florida public high schools and active duty military from developmental education courses, and required institutions to offer an array of delivery methods for developmental education courses. Additionally, institutions must use multiple measures to assess college readiness. The Center for Postsecondary Success (CPS) has been conducting a comprehensive evaluation of how FCS institutions have implemented the reform on their campuses. In this report we present key findings from our analysis of over 80 focus group interviews conducted with faculty, students, administrators, advisors, and other personnel at ten FCS institutions.

Our findings identify five themes including: complicated sorting procedures, expanded advising processes, revised developmental education and college-level coursework, financial aid challenges, and unforeseen concerns for student populations.

- 1. In response to the legislation FCS institutions created new intake and advising processes that incorporated complicated sorting procedures for exempt and non-exempt students.*
- 2. Campus personnel were concerned about not requiring placement tests, but the use of multiple measures in advising has produced a more holistic process that has resulted in more students seeking advising appointments and more time spent with each student.*
- 3. In terms of revised coursework, faculty and students communicated mixed feelings on the new course modalities, while faculty resisted adjusting the rigor of college-level courses for exempt students.*
- 4. A number of challenges related to financial aid were associated with the timing of disbursement, students' ability to maintain "satisfactory academic progress," and the denial of financial aid to fund developmental education classes for exempt student veterans and their families.*
- 5. Many campus personnel and students in our sample expressed concern that different student populations have been affected by the legislative changes in a variety of ways, many unforeseen.*

COMPLICATED SORTING PROCEDURES

FCS institutions had to modify and in some cases create new intake processes to comply with SB 1720. Universally, institutions modified their application forms to include questions that would assist admissions staff in initially identifying students as exempt or non-exempt based on the legislation. These questions typically covered high school graduation date, high school academic courses and grades, and military service.

In addition to the admissions application, all 10 institutions used high school transcripts and test score data from the SAT, ACT, and/or Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT) to support advisor recommendations for course placement. When transcripts or test scores were not available, advisors at most institutions we visited strongly encouraged students to take placement tests to ensure more accurate course placement. An advisor critiqued the new sorting procedures developed in response to SB 1720:

I almost feel like we're Hogwarts with a sorting hat, you know. Every student comes in and gets sorted into mandated and non-mandated, and that defines their induction process and that defines which orientation flavor they get. And that created all kinds of complications for us. And just getting that to be right has turned out to be hugely problematic...We just found it to be unwieldy; just the administration on the requirements in the process became a little bit unwieldy.

Many of the institutions provided students with informal ways to assess their college ready status without violating the statute. As students became aware of the mandate regarding testing and the criteria for exempt and non-exempt status, many students in our sample refused testing and opted out of completing developmental education courses.

EXPANDED ADVISING PROCESSES

Overall, administrators, faculty, and advisors were concerned about not requiring placement tests. However, the use of multiple measures, including high school course taking and extracurricular activities, in academic advising was perceived by many advisors we interviewed as "more holistic" and improved the accuracy of advising recommendations. One advisor reflected:

...advising appointments used to be very descriptive... First semester, you know, especially if the student was all prep, there was no discussion about major, there was no discussion about the career goals... It was, 'Here's your prep. This is where you start.' [Now] the opportunity for that conversation exists, that opportunity to get the student to think more about their educational process.

The cumulative effect of the changes to the advising process has created an increased student need for the services of academic advisors. The advisors we spoke with believe the reform has increased both the number of students seeking advising appointments and the length of time spent on each appointment.

REVISED DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION AND COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES

Faculty designed new developmental education curricula inclusive of the modularized, compressed, co-requisite, and contextualized course options. Sentiments from faculty and students were mixed about the new course modalities. Most faculty expressed serious concerns about the most commonly adopted modality, the compressed course, while reactions to the modularized courses represented a greater balance between positive and negative views. Faculty and students expressed fewer negative sentiments about the contextualized and co-requisite course modalities, though these options

were less frequently adopted than the compressed and modularized modalities.

Despite the new modalities, many exempt students oftentimes opted into college-level courses, and were more likely to opt into developmental education courses in math than in English/writing and reading. At some of the institutions we visited, increased enrollments in college-level courses resulted in fewer qualified faculty as college-level courses require more credentialing than developmental education courses.

Faculty reported that the content and level of challenge in college-level courses was affected by having more academically underprepared students enrolled in them. Many faculty resisted adjusting college-level courses for exempt students, opting instead to clearly outline academic expectations for students at the beginning of the semester. One faculty member expressed her philosophy to students:

I told them on the first day, we are in the deep end of the pool. If you can't even float, you don't belong here, because I can't be that kind of lifeguard. I need you at least floating and then I will take you the rest of the way.

FINANCIAL AID CHALLENGES

Participants in our focus groups reported a number of SB 1720 influenced issues with the disbursement of financial aid to students. For example, students enrolled in 8-week compressed courses offered in the first part of the fall semester would typically receive financial aid disbursements at the end of September. However, if students enrolled in 8-week compressed courses offered during the second half of the semester, their financial aid disbursement would be delayed until well after the course was underway. Additionally, maintaining "satisfactory academic progress" stipulated by financial aid awards became

an issue when exempt students performed poorly in college-level courses.

A major unforeseen complication arose for veteran students in that the Veteran's Administration (VA) will not cover the costs of developmental education for exempt students, and their dependents, because the courses are not classified as required. An advisor we interviewed recounted vivid descriptions of a number of experiences with veterans and their families. In one example, she said:

I have had students in tears at the window because I had to tell them that we can't pay for that class. You don't...you don't need it. It's not required. If a class is not absolutely required for them to graduate, the VA can't pay for it. I can't certify it. That's what this law does. It makes those prerequisite prep classes not required.

Overall, campus personnel expressed concern that the financial aid challenges may slow degree completion because some students drop out for a semester when they are unable to pay their tuition and fees. In addition, there was concern that students would exhaust their financial aid eligibility by having several unsuccessful attempts in college-level coursework.

UNFORESEEN CONCERNS FOR STUDENT POPULATIONS

Many campus personnel and students in our sample expressed concern that different student populations have been affected by the legislative changes in a variety of ways, many unforeseen. Campus personnel and students at the FCS institutions we visited identified some challenges for English Language Learners (ELL), low SES students, and veterans.

Administrators, faculty, and advisors at institutions we visited were concerned about the impact SB 1720 had on English Language Learners (ELL) and students

for whom English is a Second Language (ESL). Across many of the institutions, exempt ELL/ESL students, like other exempt students, claimed their exempt status even when strongly advised to first consider developmental education courses, and presented with evidence to support this track.

There was an awareness that low-income students face a number of barriers that hamper their access, retention, and academic success. While institutions provide computer labs, transportation and family obligations can hamper economically disadvantaged students' ability to access these services. Faculty members reported that students with major financial obligations often work longer hours, and have less time to spend on homework and assignments, which presented serious challenges when these students opted out of developmental education. One faculty member explained:

Most of them [low income students] work. They can't – most of them are obviously on financial aid; they get full financial aid, but they don't have a car, they have to take the bus, you know, they – a lot of 'em, they come to school hungry and they've got kids.

Finally, as stated previously, several campus personnel expressed concern that the legislation disproportionately impacted veterans because the Veteran's Administration will no longer reimburse exempt veterans and their families for developmental education courses that are now considered optional.

CONCLUSION

The findings from our site visits highlight the complexity of comprehensive education policy reform. There was strong consensus that poor student outcomes and the costliness of developmental education were problems; however, faculty, administrators, advisors, and other campus personnel are unsure whether SB 1720 is the solution to these problems. Many campus personnel remain convinced that developmental education classes serve an important purpose for academically underprepared students. Further study, particularly analysis of student records data in combination with continued implementation analysis, will help inform the continued effort to reform developmental education in Florida with credible evidence so that policies and practices aimed at increasing student postsecondary success can be put in place.