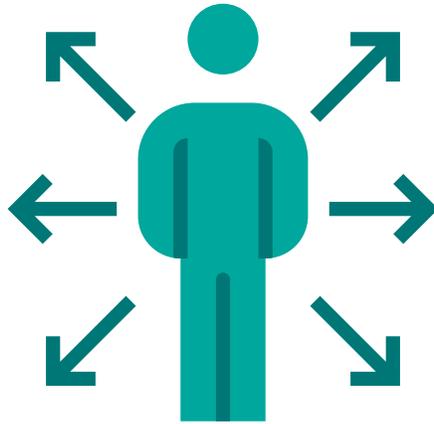


Placing Deaf Students in College Courses



Overview

Deaf¹ students enroll in colleges with a range of academic readiness in math, reading, and writing. Both two-year and four-year colleges offer developmental courses, also known as remedial courses, in core academic areas for students who need to build those skills prior to taking college-level courses.² It is fairly common for all students (39%), and even more so for deaf students (42%), to enroll in developmental courses during their postsecondary careers.³ Postsecondary institutions often use placement exams as part of how they determine student eligibility for developmental and college-level coursework.⁴

This document provides background information and considerations for placement decisions for deaf students into developmental and college-level coursework.

Placement Exams

Postsecondary institutions can use a range of measures of student readiness for college-level courses, including standardized assessments. The two most widely used placement exams are ACCUPLACER and COMPASS⁵:

- ACCUPLACER, developed by the College Board, includes a written essay and computer adaptive tests in reading, writing, and math.^{6,7}
- COMPASS, developed by ACT Inc., includes a written essay and computer adaptive tests in reading, writing, and math.⁸

Accessibility of standardized assessments and the use of the resulting scores is a critical equity issue for deaf students. Assessment accommodations (e.g., extended time, separate testing environment, interpreters for test content) are often an important part of ensuring that students have equal access to test content. Each test company has its own guidelines and criteria for determining what accommodations are allowed. For information on steps to take when requesting accommodations for exams in postsecondary settings, see *Student Planning Guide: Testing and Accommodations* (nationaldeafcenter.org/testplanning).

Best Practices in Placement Testing

The goal of placement decisions is to match students with the level of instruction that will support their progress toward degree completion. If placement decisions are accurate, students enroll in a course that is neither too advanced nor too basic for their proficiency in that content area.

One way to determine the effectiveness of placement decisions is to examine the predictive validity of the different ways that students are placed into different courses. Some institutions use placement exams, and others include information such as high school GPA, high school course completion, writing assessments, and other student characteristics. Predictive validity analyzes the relationship between these different ways that placement decisions are made and student outcomes, such as course pass rate, persistence into college-level courses, and degree completion. Because the degree of predictive validity is not the same for all populations, it is important to consider carefully what information is used for placement decisions.⁹

Key findings regarding the predictive validity of different measures of student readiness for college-level coursework include the following:

- Predictive validity often varies by subject area. For example, placement exams for math appear to be more accurate than placement exams in English language arts.⁵
- High school GPA and college admissions test scores are valid predictors of undergraduate academic performance.^{8, 10}
- However, using both high school GPA and college admissions test scores is more effective for placement decisions of students into developmental and college-level courses than using either of those measures alone.^{8, 10}
- Although high school GPA and entrance exams are related to retention through later years of postsecondary coursework, college academic performance itself is the strongest predictor of academic progress.¹¹ Student performance in early college-level courses is a stronger predictor of performance in later college-level courses than measures taken prior to college enrollment.
- Using more than one measure in placement decisions reduces the proportion of students placed in developmental courses without decreasing the pass rate for students placed in college-level courses.¹² This finding shows that the use of multiple measures is more effective at determining which students are ready for college-level courses than decisions based on a single test.

Many institutions are exploring these options, and this approach is encouraged by the placement test developers.^{5, 6, 13} This approach is in line with best practices in fair assessments for deaf students.

There are many reasons why a score on a placement exam might not have strong predictive validity for deaf students, including the following:

- Cut scores for placement decisions are rarely tailored for different student populations, particularly ones as diverse as the deaf student population.
- Although less common now than in the past, there are still concerns about test items that refer to experiences that are not applicable to many deaf test takers. For example, some test items refer to sound-based experiences (e.g., hearing birds singing, turning on the radio, buying speakers) even when the question is not specifically meant to measure that knowledge. These barriers are often hidden but may pose an unfair challenge to deaf test takers compared to their hearing peers.
- Emerging research indicates that performance on standardized measures of English proficiency may not be a strong predictor of postsecondary outcomes for deaf students.¹⁴

Additional Considerations

Persistence and completion in postsecondary education requires more than academic preparation. Motivation, self-determination, well-being, and resilience through challenges are all student-level factors that are critical to postsecondary success.¹⁵ These noncognitive variables provide especially valuable information when assessing the qualification of racially diverse, international, and older students, and students with disabilities.¹⁶

Implications for transition planning and placement decisions for deaf students include the following:

- At both the high school and postsecondary levels, it is helpful to provide opportunities to build self-determination skills and support autonomous decision making for deaf students.
- Integrating assessment and discussion of noncognitive variables into advising and student services on campus benefits both traditional and nontraditional students.
- Collaborative transition planning can provide an important link between K–12 education and college enrollment. Bringing all parties to the table during transition planning, particularly as decisions are made about degree program enrollment and college readiness, will break down some of the current barriers to effective coursework planning and placement for deaf students.

Placement decisions based on multiple measures of student readiness for college-level coursework are more appropriate than placement test scores alone.

Related Resources

- The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing for Deaf Individuals
nationaldeafcenter.org/edpsychtesting
- Why Deaf Individuals May Need Accommodations When Taking Tests
nationaldeafcenter.org/testaccommodations
- Test Accessibility: What Professionals Need to Know
nationaldeafcenter.org/testaccess
- E-Learning Course: Test Equity
nationaldeafcenter.org/learn

Notes and References

¹ NDC uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, *deaf*, with the goal of recognizing the shared experiences of individuals from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.

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- ⁶ College Board. (2003). *ACCUPLACER OnLine: Technical manual*. New York, NY: College Board.
- ⁷ College Board. (2007). *ACCUPLACER coordinator's guide*. New York, NY: College Board.
- ⁸ Sawyer, R. (2010). *Usefulness of high school average and ACT scores in making college admission decisions* (ACT Research Report No. 2010-2). Iowa City, IA: ACT.
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- ¹² Ganga, M., & Mazzariello, A. (2019). *Modernizing college course placement by using multiple measures*. Washington, DC: Education Commission of the States, Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness.
- ¹³ Rutschow, E. Z., & Mayer, A. K. (2018). *Early findings from a national survey of developmental education practices*. New York, NY: Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness. Retrieved from <https://postsecondaryreadiness.org/early-findings-national-survey-developmental-education>
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- ¹⁵ Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89–125.
- ¹⁶ Sedlacek, W. E. (2011). Using noncognitive variables in assessing readiness for higher education. *Readings on Equal Education*, 25, 187–205.