

2008 Survey of Community and Technical College Testing Centers

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007 the Washington State legislature passed a bill¹ requiring that Mathematics Placement Tests (MPT) offered by the Academic Placement Testing Program (APTP)² be revised to align with College Readiness Mathematics Standards (CRMS) recently created by Washington's Transition Mathematics Project (TMP).³ Further, all public post-secondary institutions are to set a common cut-off test score to be used in determining whether students are prepared for entry into college level mathematics courses. It was anticipated that utilizing existing placement tests for college readiness testing would reduce the testing load on students by accomplishing two purposes in a single sitting. However, the content and administrative logistics of the MPT have been developed for use by the public baccalaureate institutions, and implementation issues at two-year schools are largely unknown.

The Mathematics Placement Tests were developed collaboratively by mathematics faculty at five of the six public baccalaureate institutions, and have been used for placement into college level mathematics courses at those institutions for approximately twenty years. To provide statewide student access, the tests are administered at college Testing Centers throughout the year and at independent Testing Sites each May and June. They are in paper-pencil format to facilitate large-group administration. While this administrative structure has worked well for participating institutions, it is tailored to the admissions cycle and student populations of four-year schools.

Placement needs at two-year schools differ in a number of important ways from those at the baccalaureates. Students entering two-year schools show a much broader range of mathematics readiness than do students entering baccalaureate institutions, and they require placement into a correspondingly broad range of courses. Many of these courses are below college level. Additionally, student admission to community and technical colleges is more or less continuous throughout the academic year, rather than focused on fall entrance, as is the case for four-year schools. These differences raise questions about whether the MPT can play a dual placement/college readiness role in the community and technical college setting and, further, whether there is a good fit between the current test format and existing testing infrastructure.

¹ Second Substitute House Bill 1906, 2007

² For more information on the APTP see http://www.washington.edu/oea/services/testing_center/aptp/.

³ For more information on the MPT and the College Readiness Mathematics Test (CRMT) see http://www.washington.edu/oea/services/testing_center/mpt.html.

To address these questions, we carried out a brief survey of test administrators at community and technical colleges throughout the state as summarized below.

METHOD

During May and June of 2008, we attempted to reach test administrators at each of the 34 Washington State community and technical colleges to conduct a brief [phone interview](#) regarding 1) testing resources at their respective campuses, and 2) the perceived usefulness of the Math Placement Tests for their students. We subsequently sent an [introductory email](#) and [online survey](#) to non-responders. A total of 22 (64.7%) institutions participated, sixteen via interview and six via survey. The complete list of institutions contacted is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Washington State community and technical colleges contacted

Responding Institutions	
Bellevue Community College	Peninsula College
Bellingham Technical College	Pierce College – Ft. Steilacoom
Big Bend Community College	Renton Technical College
Clark College	Seattle Central Community College
Columbia Basin College	Shoreline Community College
Edmonds Community College	South Puget Sound Community College
Everett Community College	South Seattle Community College
Grays Harbor College	Spokane Community College
Lower Columbia College	Tacoma Community College
North Seattle Community College	Wenatchee Valley College
Olympic College	Whatcom Community College
Non-Responding Institutions	
Bates Technical College	Lake Washington Technical College
Cascadia Community College	Pierce College – Puyallup
Centralia College	Skagit Valley College
Clover Park Technical College	Spokane Falls Community College
Green River Community College	Walla Walla Community College
Highline Community College	Yakima Valley Community College

FINDINGS

Testing Staff

Administrators at all 22 responding institutions identified themselves as having primary responsibility for standardized testing at their respective institutions. Of these, thirteen (59.0%) administrators reported standardized testing as their sole responsibility; two reported having sole responsibility for certain tests and collaborative responsibility for other tests; and seven

reported testing as one responsibility among many others. Other responsibilities ranged from office or department management, to teaching and tutoring, to advising and development.

While a small percentage of the administrators felt their centers to be well-staffed, most reported inadequate staffing for the volume of testing being done. Most centers have one to three full-time staff members trained to administer tests, with one to four part-time proctors that are used during particularly heavy testing times. Eight (36.4%) administrators have only themselves, or themselves plus one part-time helper, to administer tests.

Testing Facilities

All administrators described their testing areas as enclosed rooms, labs, or classrooms with controlled entry and exit. Most have glassed-in proctor stations for observation, or front office/lobby space for controlled entry. Most administrators said their computer stations could be used for paper-pencil based exams due to recessed monitors and/or additional carrel space, and can seat anywhere from 17 to 50 students at a time – though most average around 25 total stations. A few administrators described separate, designated testing rooms for paper-pencil tests, but the majority indicated that large computer labs or classrooms are used during heavy testing times. Two notable exceptions are Big Bend and Whatcom Community Colleges, which exclusively use paper-pencil placement tests developed by their faculty (Big Bend has space for 50-60 students per sitting).

There was no consistent time that administrators identified as being busiest. Responses ranged from ‘the weeks leading up to the beginning of a quarter,’ to ‘all the time,’ to every season except winter. Only two administrators estimated that they test fewer than 100 people per week during their busiest times. Most averaged between 100 and 300 per week. Two institutions reported testing 400-750 students per week during peak times, generally during the Fall.

Tests Administered

The potential capacity for administering paper-pencil, timed, proctored group tests is generally consistent with the overall testing capacity. The most commonly administered tests of this type were: the Asset® (limited basis), CASAS, CLEP, Dantes, GED, Health Card, MPT, SLEP, TOEFL, Work Keys, make-up or accommodated exams from within the institution, proctored exams from other institutions, and various national tests (such as ACT, ERI, GRE Subject, SAT, WEBCAP, WESBE)

Math Placement

Twenty of the institutions contacted utilize commercially available instruments for placement into math courses, while two institutions use tests that have been created in-house.

The three *commercial tests* utilized by responding schools are the Accuplacer® (College Board), Compass® (ACT), and Asset® (ACT). All are described as providing both developmental and

college-level mathematics placement. The Accuplacer® and Compass® are computer-adaptive tests that provide immediate score reports. They are un-timed and convenient to administer to individual students without appointments or pre-registration. The Asset® is a paper-pencil test, requiring that answer sheets be scanned and scored after each administration. It is timed and group-administered, and so requires a pre-set schedule, either with or without pre-registration. Regardless of the test(s) used, all institutions provide students with score reports immediately following test completion.

- Six institutions exclusively use the Accuplacer® for both developmental and college-level placement.
- Eleven institutions exclusively use the Compass® for both developmental and college-level placement.
- Three institutions use a combination of the Compass® and Asset®. Two of these institutions indicated that they used the Asset® on a limited basis, primarily as a back-up.

It is important to note that all three commercial tests provide additional testing modules to place students into English courses as well as mathematics.

Two institutions have created their own *in-house* tests. These are paper-pencil, multi-level, timed, group or individual tests that require pre-registration. The exams are hand-scored at both institutions. Students can either wait for results, or come back in a few days to pick up them up. The scores are imported into the Registration system within a couple of weeks.

The vast majority of placements made at responding institutions were into developmental, rather than college-level, mathematics courses. As shown in Table 2, only one administrator reported that their placements were equally balanced between these levels; more than half of the administrators reported that their developmental placements equaled or exceeded 80%.

Table 2. Estimated percentages of Math placement levels

No. of Administrators	Developmental	College-level
2	95	5
4	90	10
6	80	20
7	70	30
2	60	40
1	50	50

One administrator reported that the Math faculty at their institution were extremely unsatisfied with their current Math assessment methods. However, all other administrators reported high satisfaction with current assessment methods among testing staff, mathematics faculty, and students.

MPT

When asked whether or not the current iteration of the MPT could be administered at their campuses, the response from test administrators was contingent upon the expected volume. Most expressed concern about schedules that are already over-committed, space that is already limited, and staff that are already stretched thin. Most pointed out that offering the MPT would only increase the workload for both staff and students, since most of the incoming students are expected to place below college level, an area for which the MPT will not place.

Despite these concerns, the majority of administrators were somewhat receptive to the possibility of trying out the MPT on a limited basis. The option of becoming an APTP Test Center seemed overwhelming to administrators, but that of becoming an APTP Test Site seemed to gain hesitant assent. All of the participating administrators indicated they would be willing to host a site visit if asked.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary finding of this survey is that the General Math Placement Test will not serve the same dual function of college mathematics readiness testing and course placement at two-year institutions as at four-year institutions. The majority of students at community and technical colleges require placement into below-college level mathematics courses, levels not covered by the MPT-G. Additionally, the format of this test (paper-pencil, pre-scheduled, group) does not fit readily into the regular, daily testing process of two-year institutions which rely heavily on computer-adaptive, walk-in, and individual testing.

However, we also found that most community and technical colleges have the capability to administer tests of the same format as the MPT-G and currently do so for a variety of tests. The tests given in this format are offered as date-specific administrations once or twice a year. This pattern meets the testing needs of specific groups of students and might conceivably be used to test the relatively few incoming students requiring placement into college-level courses.

The Academic Placement Testing Program (APTP) has established two administrative models to enable statewide student access to the Math Placement Tests. Four-year institutions serve as APTP Testing Centers to provide regular ongoing testing throughout the year. Given the more limited applicability of the Math Placement Tests at two-year schools, these institutions might serve as Testing Sites offering date-specific administrations. It is important to note that students at all community and technical colleges are eligible for testing at existing APTP administrations whether or not the tests are available at their home institution.