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# **Interim Report to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education Minnesota Placement Practices Review**

Prepared by Bruce Vandal Consulting LLC

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## **About the Office of Higher Education**

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education is a cabinet-level state agency providing students with financial aid programs and information to help them gain access to postsecondary education. The agency also serves as the state's clearinghouse for data, research and analysis on postsecondary enrollment, financial aid, finance and trends.

The Minnesota State Grant Program is the largest financial aid program administered by the Office of Higher Education, awarding more than \$224 million annually in need-based grants to Minnesota residents attending eligible colleges, universities and career schools in Minnesota. The agency oversees other state scholarship programs, tuition reciprocity programs, a student loan program, Minnesota's 529 College Savings Plan, licensing and early college awareness programs for youth.

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BRUCE VANDAL CONSULTING  
COLLEGE SUCCESS STRATEGIES

## **Interim Report to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education Minnesota Placement Practices Review**

### **Overview**

Bruce Vandal Consulting LLC (BVC) in partnership with WestEd, and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) respectfully submit the following interim report to the Commissioner of the Minnesota Office of Higher Education for the Minnesota State Course Placement Practices Review (SWIFT Event #2000014656). The following report offers a description of the project, research questions, methodology, work completed to date and program activities in service of report to the Commissioner examining the current state of admissions and course placement policies within the Minnesota State System.

### **Summary of Current Research, Policy, and Practice**

#### **Course Placement Reform**

Existing literature on remedial and developmental education has documented profound inequities that can exist in course placement and student success. For over a decade, institutions, systems, and states have been discovering that students placed into remedial or developmental education courses are less likely to enroll in those courses in the first place, and, when they do enroll, they are likely to exit the courses before they are complete.<sup>1</sup> What's more, existing research has shown that the students most at risk of falling through the cracks of developmental education are male, over the age of 25, Black, part-time, and students seeking vocational certifications.<sup>2</sup> Additional research is needed to quantify the impact on other minoritized populations that are particularly important in the Minnesota context, to include but not limited to Asian or African descent.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775709001071>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775709001071>

Several state postsecondary education systems have analyzed their student- and course-level data to determine if and how these inequitable trends have manifested in their contexts, including California<sup>3</sup>, Georgia<sup>4</sup>, Nevada<sup>5</sup>, Tennessee<sup>6</sup>, and Texas, among others.

Several states, systems and institutions have implemented and scaled evidence-based course placement and developmental education policy and practice that have resulted in significant improvements in academic outcomes for students.<sup>7</sup> Research has revealed the limitations of traditional pre-requisite remedial education course sequences<sup>8</sup> and placement practices that rely on standardized assessments<sup>9</sup>. As a result, state, system, institutional, and faculty leaders have developed innovative approaches to assess student readiness for college-level math and English courses required for a postsecondary credential. In addition, institutions have significantly reformed the delivery of math and English content for students who have been determined to need additional academic support. These new approaches have demonstrated strong scaled results from the institution to the state level<sup>10</sup>. Strategies such as the use of high school grade point average for placement into math and English, elimination of pre-requisite remedial course sequences, the implementation of corequisite support that provides academic support for students while enrolled in college-level courses, and the alignment of math course content to the skills and knowledge students need for their chosen program of study. States, systems and institutions that have implemented these reforms have seen a dramatic increase in the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ppic.org/publication/a-new-era-of-student-access-at-californias-community-colleges/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://completega.org/success-library>

<sup>5</sup> [https://ir.nevada.edu/page.php?p=remedial\\_reports](https://ir.nevada.edu/page.php?p=remedial_reports)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tbr.edu/policy-strategy/corequisite-learning-support>

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Vandal Consulting (June, 2022). Strong Start to Finish Scaling Site Evaluation - Executive Summary. Strong Start to Finish. <https://strongstart.org/resource/strong-start-to-finish-scaling-site-evaluation-executive-summary/>

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, T., Jeong, D.W., and Cho, S.W. (November, 2009) Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges. CCRC Working Paper No. 15. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. New York, NY. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/referral-enrollment-completion-developmental-education.html>

<sup>9</sup> Scott-Clayton, J. (February, 2012). Do High-Stakes Placement Exams Predict College Success? CCRC Working Paper No. 41. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York NY

<sup>10</sup> Denley, T. Scaling Co-Requisite Developmental Education, University System of Georgia Academic Affairs Technical Brief No. 1.

number and percent of students who complete their college-level math and English courses in their first academic year. Further, research has shown that students who complete college-level math and English in their first academic year are more likely to persist and earn a postsecondary credential.<sup>11</sup>

## **Admissions**

In addition to reforms in developmental education, there has been a recognition that admissions processes<sup>12</sup> may construct barriers for students as they seek to enroll in postsecondary institutions. Beyond typical admissions requirements, many students may struggle to complete additional requirements necessary to be fully admitted and matriculate to a postsecondary institution. Often, the addition of streamlined application processes, personal or technology-based assistance, and removal of non-essential requirements can result in higher admission rates.

## **Impact of Policies and Practices on Addressing Equity Gaps**

Research has shown that ineffective developmental education placement and practice<sup>13</sup> as well as complicated admissions processes<sup>14</sup> have a disproportionately negative impact on Black, Hispanic and Latino, Indigenous students; students from low-income backgrounds, adults, and other minoritized populations. Consequently, adoption of evidence-based practices can contribute to improved and more equitable student outcomes.

BVC will reference existing research and evidence-based practice to design and conduct the Minnesota State Courses Placement Practices Review. The review will identify the level of adoption of evidence-based reforms across Minnesota State institutions, study the impact of current course placement and developmental education policies and practices on student outcomes, surface areas of innovation and impact across the system, identify barriers to adoption of reforms, and gain deeper understanding of the experiences of students, faculty, institutional leaders, state leaders, institutional staff, and community members with current admissions and placement practices. Special attention will be paid to understanding the outcomes and

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<sup>11</sup> Logue, A., Douglas, D., Watanabe-Rose, M. (May, 2019) Corequisite Mathematics Remediation: Results Over Time and in Different Contexts. City University of New York Graduate Center.

<sup>12</sup> Selingo, J. (September, 2020) Who Gets in and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions. Scribner Publishing.

<sup>13</sup> Complete College America (April, 2012). Remedial Education: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere.

<sup>14</sup> Selingo, J. (September, 2020) Who Gets in and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions. Scribner Publishing.

experiences of Black, Hispanic and Latino, Indigenous, Asian, low-income, urban, rural and suburban communities.

BVC will examine the following research questions for the study:

1. What are the admissions, placement and developmental education policies and practices at Minnesota State College institutions that either impede or facilitate student admission and the success of postsecondary students overall, and for specific student populations?
2. To what extent do postsecondary institution admissions and placement policies and practices impact student outcomes in admissions, developmental education placement and, educational/economic progress of various student populations to include:
  - Black and students of African heritage.
  - Hispanic and Latino students.
  - Asian students, to include those of Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese heritage.
  - Indigenous students.
  - English as a Second Language students.
  - Students who received free and reduced-price lunch and/or Pell eligibility.
  - Students who qualified for Special Education Services.
  - Students who did or did not have a rigorous high school curriculum.
  - Students who were or were not in CTE programs.
  - Students enrolled in urban, suburban, and rural institutions.
  - Students who have graduated from urban, suburban and rural high schools.

### **Project Advisory Committee (PAC)**

BVC will work closely with a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) that will be convened in collaboration with OHE. The PAC will provide input and assistance to BVC as it conducts the review, ultimately co-creating the recommendations that will be included in the final report. The PAC will allow BVC to work closely with key stakeholders who represent OHE, Minnesota State, student and community advocates and other key

stakeholders. BVC will ensure the perspectives of those who are impacted by current policy and practice are engaged in the design and the implementation of the review. Further, the PAC can help BVC understand the larger higher education ecosystem in Minnesota, the elements of the Minnesota State system that are important to consider as part of the review, and the community and cultural contexts of the populations.

The PAC will ensure that the work is equity-centered, that standards used for assessing existing policy and practice are agreed to by key stakeholders, and that the methodology used for both the qualitative and quantitative analysis is articulated in a manner that resonates with key stakeholder groups. BVC welcomes the opportunity to work with OHE to recruit members that represent diverse perspectives and deep expertise in both the higher education system and the experiences of students.

BVC proposes the following charge for the Project Advisory Committee:

*The Project Advisory Committee will contribute to the Minnesota Placement Practices Review by providing critical insights on the state of placement and admissions practices across the Minnesota State system, ensuring that key stakeholder perspectives are represented in the project, supporting equity-centered data collection and analysis, reviewing project activities and deliverables, and support development of recommendations for consideration by the Commissioner of the Office of Higher Education.*

## **Project Activities**

BVC will conduct the following project activities in close consultation with the PAC.

### **Task 1: Create an Inventory of Current Policy, Practice, and Assessment and Assess Fidelity of Implementation**

BVC will identify current evidence-based admissions and placement policies, practices, and assessments that are being deployed in the field, create an inventory of placement and admissions policies and practices at Minnesota State institutions, and determine the fidelity of implementation of policies and practices to evidence-based practice. Once disaggregated quantitative institution-level data is available, BVC will explore the extent that high fidelity implementation of evidence-based practices has or has not resulted in improved and more equitable outcomes for students. The multi-step process is as follows:

1. **Identify national evidence-based policies and practices and develop a Fidelity Framework to review policies and practices.** BVC will conduct a review of existing literature to include descriptive and experimental research, quality standards of implementation from research, a scan of state and system

policies, and state reports documenting the implementation and scale of policies and practices. BVC will use this information to develop a Fidelity Framework that will outline the key elements of evidence-based implementation of developmental education and admissions policies and practices. The Fidelity Framework will be reviewed and approved by the PAC. At a minimum, the Fidelity Framework will include the following elements:

- a. *Admissions* - Evidence-based admissions policies, practices and assessments for both selective and open access institutions that contribute to equitable access to postsecondary institutions for Black, Hispanic and Latino, Asian, and Indigenous students, English language learners, students from low-income backgrounds, adult students, and other minoritized students.
- b. *Placement* - Evidence-based assessments, policies and practices associated with equitable placement of students into the math and English courses aligned to their chosen program of study. The literature review will identify policies and practices that maximize the likelihood that students will complete college-level math and English courses in their first academic year, reduce time and credits to degree, and result in improved retention and graduation.
- c. *Acceleration and Alignment* - Evidence-based policies and practices that eliminate pre-requisite developmental education course sequences and accelerate students into and through college-level math courses aligned to and required for their chosen program of study, within one academic year. In addition, the Fidelity Framework and inventory will reference policies and practices that align college-level math courses to the skills and knowledge required for programs of study.

The identification of policy and practice will include data driven approaches that advance equity goals and improvement of student outcomes. The Fidelity Framework will include practices for a range of institutions, student performance metrics that are predictive of college student success, and equity-minded approaches that address the unique needs of various student populations. The identified national best practices will serve as a benchmark for review of efforts in Minnesota. The PAC will review the Fidelity Framework and inventory, and provide critical feedback that will ensure the framework is aligned to state goals.

2. **Develop an inventory of existing evidence-based policies and practices at Minnesota State institutions.** BVC will develop an inventory of current Minnesota policies and practices. Initial research on institutional policies will be



conducted by reviewing institutional websites, course catalogs, admissions materials, institutional policies and other relevant resources. In addition, BVC will send the template to provosts/chief academic officers at Minnesota State institutions for validation and accuracy of information. BVC will examine state level policies and practices to determine whether they facilitate or impede the institutional implementation of evidence-based admissions, placement, acceleration, and alignment practices. The inventory will be compiled and shared with the PAC and the Office of Higher Education.

3. **Assess fidelity of implementation of current policies and practices included in the institutional inventory.** BVC will compare and analyze the extent that implementation of policies and practices are consistent with evidence-based practices outlined in the Fidelity Framework. The analysis will address the following questions:

- What are the current admission and course placement policies, practices, and assessments used by the Minnesota State system?
- How does the implementation of policy and practice vary across colleges and universities?
- Do the policies, practices, and assessments conform to national and or best practice standards?
- Does implementation of policies and practices conform to national and or best practice standards?

The analysis seeks to reveal examples of policy and practice that are consistent with evidence-based practice and result in improved and equitable student outcomes. Conversely, the analysis will review examples where policies and practices are not being implemented with fidelity to research and evidence-based practice. In addition, BVC will conduct a state-level trend analysis of evidence-based approaches identified in the Fidelity Framework. Data to be reported will include the number of institutions that have demonstrated high-fidelity implementation of evidence-based admissions, placement, acceleration, and alignment practices. Elevating exemplary institutional practices aligned with the Fidelity Framework will advance improvement efforts throughout Minnesota State institutions. The analysis will identify potential areas of focus for the scaling and refinement of evidence-based policies and practices at both the system and institutional level. The analysis will be presented to the PAC for review and subsequently integrated into the final report and recommendations.

## Task 2: Surface Faculty, Staff, and Student Perceptions of Admissions and Placement Practices

Will conduct surveys, focus groups and other qualitative methods to understand the perceptions and experiences of the people involved in and/or impacted by admission policies and developmental education practices. The analysis will also provide insights for better understanding of the quantitative data analysis. Principles of Qualitative Data Collection.

BVC has drafted the following principles to guide qualitative data collection. The team will review these principles with the PAC and revise as necessary.

- Data collection will be conducted in a manner that respects individual differences and the circumstances of the participants.
- The BVC team will proactively work with OHE, the PAC, and institutions to ensure that participants in surveys and focus groups represent the diversity of the population within Minnesota State institutions with particular attention to Black, Hispanic and Latino, Hmong, Vietnamese, Somali and Indigenous students.
- All interviewees and focus group participants will be compensated for their time.
- All data will be confidential.
- BVC will work with OHE/Minnesota State to use the assessment of fidelity from Task 1 to classify each institution into one the following implementation fidelity categories: Little to No Implementation, Partial Implementation, Advanced Implementation, Fully-Scaled. These categories will be used in data collection processes, ensuring perspectives across these categories are represented, and in the analysis to understand patterns in perceptions and experiences. These categories will also be used in the quantitative analysis in Task 3.

### *Data Collection Activities*

BVC will collaborate with OHE to conduct an IRB review for the following data collection activities.

1. **Administer a departmental survey.** The survey will increase understanding of the assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs of faculty and staff and to collect data on course structures and practices. The survey will be administered to department chairs and program directors in the following departments: Math, English, Developmental Education, ESL, Advising, and Admissions. The PAC will give input on the inclusion of additional programs.
2. **Conduct Cross-Institutional Focus Groups.** BVC will conduct the following focus groups.

- a. Eight faculty and staff focus groups with participants representing the different fidelity of implementation categories.
- b. Four student focus groups that are representative of the student populations enrolled in Minnesota State institutions and have experience with admissions and placement practices.

Data will be analyzed for trends, examples of innovation and barriers, and insights that could inform future actions. These findings will be presented to the PAC for review and discussion and then integrated into the final report and recommendations.

### **Task 3: Perform Quantitative Analysis Using Data Provided by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education to Examine Student Outcomes**

To support OHE in the data exploration described in Task 3, the BVC team will collaborate with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). NCHEMS has a strong history in supporting states in rigorous data analysis, including work on developmental education. To respond to the questions in Task 3, NCHEMS will:

1. **Meet with OHE staff to align on processes for a SLEDS data request and on the main components of the request.** Submit a formal request for data from the Minnesota SLEDS system by January 4, 2024.
2. **Meet with the PAC and OHE staff to align on the anticipated format of the data, available data elements, and the research questions.** NCHEMS and OHE staff will develop a full list of data elements that will be available for analysis. NCHEMS will also facilitate discussion with the PAC of which research questions were proposed, what data are available to answer them, and any other analyses that the PAC would like to add or revise in the project plan.
3. **Complete a baseline description of the data to support the work of the PAC.** This baseline assessment will include descriptive information on placement into developmental education and completion of college-level courses in the first academic year by institution and by selected student characteristics, and for at least first-time, full-time students but for broader student populations if possible.
4. **NCHEMS will add metrics to the dataset according to the policy information uncovered in Tasks 1 and 2.** This will enable disaggregated analysis by institution and by the degree of fidelity determined for each institution in Task 1
5. **NCHEMS will proceed with descriptive analysis that examines items consistent with the assessment outlined in Minnesota Laws 2023 Chapter 41 Article 2 Section 34, and are listed below:**

- a. **Have policies, practices, and assessments resulted in adverse consequences for a student and their family; including burdensome economic and related costs of delaying their degree plans?**
- b. **Have policies, practices, and assessments hindered the participation of students?**
- c. **Have policies, practices, and assessments hindered the placement, retention, or timely college graduation of students?**
- d. **Have policies, practices, and assessments excluded students from admission thereby hindering their full participation in higher education?**

NCHEMS will complete statistical testing to determine if significant differences exist between groups of students.

#### **Task 4: Summarize Findings and Impact**

Findings from all three tasks will be compiled and analyzed from both a quantitative and qualitative lens. Quantitative data revealing either strong or lagging student outcomes will be examined alongside the experiences of students, faculty, institutional and community leaders, and college staff from the qualitative analysis. Such an analysis will reveal both an understanding of the impact of reforms, but also the enabling conditions that resulted in either low or high fidelity implementation of reforms. The findings will inform recommendations in the Final Report and assist the Office of Higher Education with making determinations about the impact of policies and practices on various student communities. BVC will seek external and expertise from local stakeholders with assistance from the Office of Higher Education to address reviews, determinations, findings, and recommendations.

Findings from the report will include:

1. Disaggregated statewide trend data to measure impact of placement policy and practice, developmental education instruction, and admissions policy and practice on agreed upon student success metrics.
2. An analysis of the fidelity of implementation of reforms at Minnesota postsecondary institutions using the Fidelity Framework.
3. Quantitative analysis that compares student outcomes against the assessment of fidelity of implementation of reforms at Minnesota State institutions.

4. An assessment of enabling conditions that either facilitated or impeded the fidelity of implementation.
5. An analysis of the impact of current admissions, placement and developmental education policies on students to include evidence of:
  - Adverse consequences for students and families, including burdensome economic related costs of delaying their degree plans;
  - Hindered participation of students
  - Hindered placement, retention, or timely college graduation of students
  - Exclusion of students from admission that hinders the full participation of students in higher education.
6. A review of impact for various student communities, to include but not limited to Black, Hispanic and Latino, Asian, Indigenous, and ESL students; students from low-income backgrounds and from urban, rural and, urban communities. The review will provide evidence of students from agreed upon communities being:
  - Denied admission
  - Disproportionately assigned to enroll in developmental education courses
  - Delayed or deterred in their educational progress.
7. An analysis to provide evidence of whether policies and practices:
  - Are disproportionately reliant on test scores
  - Impose barriers for students in terms of enrollment, retention and completion
  - May be culturally biased

## **Project Deliverables**

**BVC will complete the following remaining deliverables:**

## **Final Report**

**Due: January 1, 2025**

Report 2 will be submitted to OHE with all outlined tasks, data analysis, findings, and recommendations completed. The report will be vetted with the PAC to ensure it addresses key areas of interest and that the committee concurs with recommendations. BVC will seek external advice and expertise to address questions to the proposed scope of Report 2 as well as any determinations, findings, and recommendations within the report

**Executive Summary and PowerPoint of the approach, results, findings, impact and recommendations.**

**Due January 1, 2025**

BVC will consult with the PAC to ensure that the executive summary and PowerPoint are designed to effectively communicate the report findings and recommendations to key audiences for the report. Special consideration will be made that executive summary and PowerPoints address the interests of the state legislature, provides clarity to the Chancellor and Board of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and appropriately informs faculty, institutional leaders, community-based leaders and representatives, and the citizens of the Minnesota of the current state of developmental education reform in Minnesota and recommendations for implementing and scaling effective developmental education reforms.

## **Literature Review**

**Due April 1, 2024**

BVC will conduct a literature review that documents the evidence-base on various developmental education reforms to include multiple measure placement, corequisite support, and math pathways. The review will be utilized to establish standards to assess the level of adoption of reforms at institutions. In addition, the literature review will be a resource for the state legislature, Office of Higher Education, and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities as they consider system and state efforts to implement and scale evidence-based developmental education reforms. The literature review will include the following elements:

- Limitations of traditional pre-requisite developmental education reform.
- Overview of policies and practices associated with serving English Language Learners

- Experimental studies measuring impact of developmental education reforms to include corequisite support, multiple measure placement, and math pathways
- State and system reports on impact of state and system-level scaled reforms of developmental education.
- Reports on effective developmental education reform instructional practices.

In addition, the literature review will examine research and evidence-based practices associated with maximizing student admission and matriculation to postsecondary education, particularly for minoritized and underserved populations. The literature review will examine the following:

- Research and evidence-based practice on the impact of admission requirements on student application rates by race/ethnicity, income, age, geography, and other minoritized status.
- Evidence base for alternative admission processes to include automatic applications, automatic admissions, and non-test based application approaches.
- Additional barriers to first-time student matriculation beyond college admission.