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Assessment: Stopping the Revolving Door at Rock Valley College

Richard L. Bernardi
K. Sue Castleberry

The concept of an open door for anyone who wants to attend a community college regardless of that person's educational background is an admirable one. The reality, however, is that the open door too often becomes a revolving door. Students from ages eighteen to eighty choose to attend community colleges for a multitude of reasons. These students often have the proper motivation, but they frequently face failure because they lack the requisite basic skills to succeed. At Rock Valley College, the decision was made to stop the revolving door.

Student Placement

Beginning with the fall semester of 1986, Rock Valley College implemented an assessment program to turn that revolving door into a guarantee that its students have a chance to succeed by prescribing mandated placement in developmental reading and writing courses.

The guarantee for a chance to succeed hinges on the stipulation that students are excluded from college level courses until they successfully complete the necessary reading courses. Every new student enrolling in a credit course is tested in reading, English, and math. Only students enrolled at Rock Valley College prior to the fall of 1986, students holding post-secondary degrees from institutions accredited

by recognized regional associations, students enrolling only in non-credit courses, or transfer students whose college transcripts indicate a basic skills proficiency at the college level are exempt from the assessment program. Students are allowed to take the assessment tests only one time, so the placement process is set in motion at the end of a one hour and thirty minute test session. Although students are tested in reading, English, and math, the cornerstone of the placement program is based on the results of the reading tests.

Reading

Students scoring at or above a tenth grade equivalent on the comprehension subtest of *The Nelson-Denny Reading Test*, Form E (Brown, Bennett, and Hanna, 1981) are allowed to enroll in any course they are otherwise qualified to take. Students scoring below the tenth grade equivalent are required to take a second reading test. Students may choose to take the second test immediately following the first test or they may return for testing at a later date.

The *Degrees of Reading Power*, Form PA-2 (College Entrance Examination Board, 1984) was chosen as the second test because it addresses reading as a process. The cloze format of the *Degrees of Reading Power* test is different from the multiple choice format of *The Nelson-Denny Reading Test*. Students have unlimited time for the test and are counseled not to take the test unless they are rested and at ease.

Only reading specialists, teachers with masters degrees in reading, administer the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test. These reading specialists conduct a ten to twenty minute interview with each prospective student as he or she finishes the test to determine appropriate course placement. During the interview, the reading specialists ask the prospective students to describe themselves as readers, to discuss

any reading problems they may have had in schools they previously attended, and to describe any special classes or help they may have had to alleviate their reading deficits. The specialists describe the purpose of the placement procedure and the substance of the reading program.

Students scoring 95% or better on the DRP are exempt from the required developmental reading courses. For students with lower scores, reading course placement is mandated and students are allowed to take college level classes only when they have successfully completed assigned remediation courses. Students whose scores are between 94% and 50% are assigned to one of three reading courses:

- Reading 099 is for students with DRP test scores between 94% and 75%, and reading levels between grades 8 and 10. Students who place into Reading 099 and Reading 096 are allowed to enroll concurrently in courses on the Reading Limited Course List. This list is composed of performance music courses, studio art courses, physical education activity courses, mathematics courses, student orientation courses, a small number of technical and computer courses which require limited reading, and developmental English 098. For those courses which have textbooks or required handbooks, readability formulas have been applied to determine that the reading level and amount of required reading are within the ability range of the students.

- Reading 096 is for students with DRP test scores between 74% and 65%, and reading levels between grades 6 and 8.

- Reading 080 is for students with DRP test scores between 64% and 50%. Because these students are so under-prepared in their reading ability, they may not enroll in courses on the Reading Limited Course List until they pass Reading 080 and enroll in Reading 096. One English course and one math course are open to them.

Students who score below 50% are counseled to seek remediation through a literacy program or some other agency offering reading instruction at an appropriate level.

English and mathematics

Mandated placement in English courses is determined by students' performance on the *RVC English Placement Test* (Communications Division, 1979) as well as on the reading tests. The English test consists of eight sections testing such skills as making generalizations, sequencing ideas, language usage, grammatical rules, and proofreading. The test consists of 62 items in an objective format. Students must score 62% or better on the English test and test at a tenth grade equivalent on the reading test before they can enroll in English composition courses. If a student scores 62% or better on the English test, but has mandated placement in a reading course, that student is not allowed to enroll in an English composition course other than English 098 until the Reading 099 course has been successfully completed. Students enrolled in English 098 must achieve a grade of C or better in order to enroll in English 100 or English 101.

New students take the *Mathematics Placement Test* (Mathematics Division, 1984) and are then advised to take Math 090 (arithmetic) if they score 20% or below or Math 095 (high school algebra) if they score 20% to 44%.

Assessment and course completion results

Over eleven thousand new students have been tested since the assessment program began in the fall semester of 1986. Seventy-five percent of the students tested were exempt from taking developmental reading courses based on their performance on *The Nelson-Denny Reading Test*. Of the 25% who took the *Degree of Reading Power* test, 19%

were exempt from the reading courses. Fifty-four percent of the students who took the DRP were placed in Reading 099, 18% were placed in Reading 096, and 9% were placed in Reading 080.

The success rate of the students placed in the reading courses has been dramatic. Of the total number of students enrolled in the reading courses, 62% passed Reading 099, 55% passed Reading 096, and 40% passed Reading 080 with a grade of C or better. The success rate of the students who completed the course was considered a more accurate reflection of the students' progress because approximately 20% of the students who enroll in the reading courses are no-shows or drop out before mid-term. Of the number of students who complete the courses, 76% passed Reading 099, 69% passed Reading 096, and 57% passed Reading 080 with a grade of C or better.

Post-test results on *the Nelson-Denny Reading Test*, Form F, show an average gain of two years in one semester. Students average a post-test gain of nine points on the *Degrees of Reading Power*, Form PB-2. More importantly, the performance in college credit classes of the students who were required to take the reading courses was compared to the performance of students who had much stronger reading skills when they entered Rock Valley College. A sample of 219 students who had an average reading score of 7.3 grade equivalent and passed Reading 099 was compared to 219 randomly selected students who had an average score of 14.0 grade equivalent on *The Nelson-Denny Reading Test*, Form E. The average GPA in credit courses for students required to take reading courses was 2.25 and the average GPA in credit courses for students exempt from reading courses was 2.36. Clearly, students successfully completing

Reading 099 and continuing on at Rock Valley College are succeeding as well as students entering with much stronger reading skills. There has also been a high success rate for students enrolled in English 098. Seventy-seven percent of the students who passed English 098 with a grade of C or better passed English 100 or 101.

Conclusion

Rock Valley College faculty, administration, and students are pleased with the results of the assessment program. Faculty know that when a student enrolls in a credit course, that student has a minimum reading level of tenth grade, and, therefore, a chance to succeed. Administration has seen the revolving door turn into a series of doors to be opened one-by-one by the students to give themselves a good chance to succeed. Students entering Rock Valley College know their basic skills will be assessed and they will be placed in courses designed to help them succeed. At Rock Valley College, the door is open but has stopped revolving.

References

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