

Executive Summary

INEQUITY BY DESIGN

How College Placement Policies Perpetuate Institutional Racism

JUNE 2021

This report explores how community and technical college enrollment and placement practices are working for high school graduates in the Road Map Project region. Research findings and recommendations are products of a three-study series led in partnership among the Puget Sound College & Career Network, Highline College, and the Community Center for Education Results.

For many young people in the Road Map Project region, Community and Technical Colleges (CTCs) are an essential gateway to meaningful, living-wage, career opportunities. Yet, less than half of the region's high school graduates who enroll directly in Road Map Project region CTCs are able to complete credentials or transfer to a four-year institution within their first four years of CTC enrollment. These low completion and transfer rates are driven in part by what happens at the very beginning of a student's journey when they enter the institution and are subjected to an assessment of their "readiness" for college-level courses.

CTC assessment and placement processes serve the primary purpose of predicting the appropriate levels of math and English classes for entering students. Yet, all too often, the approach to placement can systematically and substantially underestimate student capacity, particularly among students of color. Despite over a decade of work to improve placement outcomes across the state and in the Road Map Project region, racial equity gaps in access to college-level courses persist. This report finds that current Road Map Project region CTC assessment and placement policies, along with variation in policies between colleges and inconsistent policy implementation, contribute to racial inequity.

Eradicating racial equity gaps begins with understanding the damaging impact current policies have on students of color and exploring why they exist. This report is the culmination of a multiyear, three-study series designed to help CTCs in the Road Map Project region transition more rapidly to assessment and placement approaches that can increase equity across different racial and ethnic groups and support the academic success of all students. The findings draw attention to the compounding inequities that exist in current college placement policies and show clearly that these policies sustain racial inequity among racial groups, which by definition makes them racist in their impact.

Key Findings on CTC Assessment and Placement

Based on a longitudinal analysis of student transcripts as well as student surveys and focus groups, the key findings from this report reveal the following:

- 1 *Students of color are overrepresented in precollege courses.*
- 2 *Taking two or more precollege math courses is detrimental to the success of students in completing college-level math.*
- 3 *Students of color are disproportionately placed into precollege courses even when their high school transcripts make them eligible for college-level courses.*
- 4 *Racial disparities in precollege coursetaking persist regardless of high school GPA or coursetaking.*
- 5 *Students report that the assessment and placement process is confusing and they want it changed.*
- 6 *Students who place by high school transcript are more likely to avoid precollege courses and have a better placement experience overall when compared to students who place by standardized placement test.*
- 7 *Access to college courses is more dependent on which CTC a student attends rather than their previous coursetaking.*
- 8 *Inequity in the K-12 system contributes to inequity in college placement outcomes.*
- 9 *Incremental changes to transcript-based placement policies can improve access to college-level courses, but are unlikely to address large scale racial inequities.*

Summary of Recommendations

The findings in this report shed new light on important issues students face in the Road Map Project region. Sadly, these are not new issues. Racial inequities in college placement outcomes have long plagued CTC improvement efforts suggesting possible flaws in their overarching theory of change.

To eradicate racist policies and other systemic barriers that disproportionately impact students of color, Road Map Project region CTC leaders — including presidents, faculty and staff at all levels — must view the multiple barriers that students face through an antiracist lens. Fixing assessment and placement problems will require an examination of why colleges were initially created and who they were created to serve. To this end we offer two layers of recommendations.

Pushing for a paradigm shift in placement

To improve access to college-level courses and increase racial equity in college placement outcomes for students across the state, we recommend that CTCs make placement into college-level courses the default placement for all recent high school graduates.

“I wish the school told me beforehand that you could use high school transcripts to place you in English and math classes instead of taking the test and being placed in a class that puts you behind.”

Latinx Kent School District graduate
studying design at Green River College

K-12 and Community and Technical College Recommendations

We recognize each institution is on its own path to addressing racial inequities and that achieving a paradigm shift will require a coordinated and sustained effort. In the meantime, here are four more immediate recommendations and aligned actions that can help the current system evolve in this direction:

- 1 Center students of color in the redesign of placement practices and ensure that they experience the enrollment and placement process as welcoming, trusting, and empowering.
- 2 Transform placement practices and transcript-based placement policies to maximize student access to college-level courses.
- 3 Investigate and acknowledge the impact of current placement practices on students of color.
- 4 Investigate and acknowledge the impact of inequitable grading distribution and access to math for students of color in K-12.