

Implementing CollegeReady™ to Promote Students' Preparation for College-Level Math: Jacksonville State University Case Study

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Many students who pursue postsecondary education enter college unprepared for college-level coursework. Almost two-thirds of students entering a community college and a third of students entering a 4-year college lack basic math and writing skills, and they often find themselves placed in developmental or remedial courses in their first year of college.¹ Unfortunately, students placed into remedial-math and English courses often have poorer educational outcomes; their retention and degree completion rates lag behind those of the students who enter college ready for college-level work.² Colleges and universities have recognized this problem, and many are taking steps to help students improve their academic preparation with the goal of reducing the need for remedial course-taking. In particular, many colleges, including Jacksonville State University (JSU), have implemented EdReady – now offered through ACT as CollegeReady – for this very purpose.

Unlike traditional placement tests, which institutions may use in a high-stakes manner to determine whether students should be placed in a remedial course, CollegeReady is a low-stakes placement system. Students can log on to the system at any time from any location and work at their own pace. If their

initial CollegeReady score falls below the institution's target score, students can view study options and follow a personalized learning path to fill gaps in knowledge and skills. Using this approach, many students raise their scores and avoid remediation. In partnership with JSU, ACT researchers examined the relationship between incoming students' initial and most recent CollegeReady math scores with course placement decisions and math course outcomes. Preliminary findings from this study suggest that CollegeReady can help students bolster their math preparation and be successful going directly into college-level courses.

Course Placement and Course Grades

In the fall of 2015, JSU offered more than 1,100 incoming students the opportunity to use CollegeReady between the time they matriculated to the start of their first semester. The objective was to help students prepare for their first math courses at JSU, especially for the students identified as needing remediation based on their admissions test scores. For placement purposes, JSU established a target math score of 43 for placement into lower-level, credit-bearing math courses and a target score of 80 for upper-level, credit-bearing math

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Table 1. Suggested Math Placement by Math Score

| Tests | N | Below 43, Developmental (N) | 43 to 79, Lower-Level, Credit-Bearing (N) | 80 or Higher, Upper-Level, Credit-Bearing (N) |
|------------------|-----|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Initial Test | 753 | 20% (153) | 78% (589) | 1% (11) |
| Most Recent Test | 753 | 13% (95) | 70% (525) | 18% (133) |

Table 2. Distribution of Initial and Most Recent Math Scores

| Initial Test Score Range | Most Recent Test Score Range | | | Total |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------|-----|-------|
| | <43 | 43 to 79 | 80+ | |
| <43 | 90 | 30 | 10 | 130 |
| 43 to 80 | 0 | 456 | 97 | 553 |
| 80+ | 0 | 0 | 11 | 11 |
| Total | 90 | 486 | 118 | 694 |

Note: Shaded area indicates students who raised their math scores to avoid remediation and/or moved up from a lower math course category to a higher math course category.

courses. JSU advised students with scores below 43 to take a remedial math course. However, JSU allowed students to enroll in either remedial or credit-bearing math courses regardless of their scores. See Table 1 for breakouts of the 753 JSU students by their initial and most recent math scores.

As shown in Table 1, 153 (20%) students failed to meet the target score of 43 based on their initial math score. However, using CollegeReady resources, that number dropped to 95 (13%).

Of the 753 students with math scores, 694 students took their most recent math test before the semester began. Table 2 contains breakouts of these 694 students by their initial and most recent test scores. Of the 130 students who had an initial math score below 43, 40 raised their math score above the target score, indicating readiness for college-level math coursework. In other words, 31% of the students who did not initially meet the target score for math and then utilized CollegeReady's learning path were able to achieve the score needed for credit-level coursework.

Given the low-stakes nature of the CollegeReady college readiness system, it

was important to ensure that math score gains reflected true learning and not artificial test score gains. Therefore, whether students who avoided remediation by raising their math score were as successful in their college-level math courses as their classmates who initially met or exceeded the target score for lower-level, credit-bearing courses was examined. Among the 40 students who raised their math scores enough to avoid remediation, 21 enrolled in a math course that was consistent with JSU's math course placement recommendations; 13 enrolled in a lower-level, credit bearing course and eight enrolled in an upper-level, credit bearing course.

31% of the students who did not initially meet the target score for math and then utilized CollegeReady's learning path were able to achieve the score needed for credit-level coursework.

In lower-level, credit-bearing math courses, the 13 students who avoided remediation through raising their math scores succeeded at a rate somewhat higher than that of the students who initially had math scores in the 43 to 79 range, as shown in Table 3. Specifically,

77% of students (10 of 13) who initially earned a math score below 43 but raised it to the 43 to 79 range earned a C or higher in their lower-level, credit-bearing math courses as compared to 71% of students who were classified as ready based on their initial math score.

In upper-level, credit-bearing math courses, the eight students who avoided remediation by raising their math scores to 80 or higher were not as successful as the students who had moved up from the 43 to 79 score range and the students with initial math scores of 80 or higher (see Table 4). Students who moved up only one level – from the 43 to 79 score range to the 80 to 100 score range – fared as well as the students who initially had a score of 80 or higher. Note that the percentages in Tables 3 and 4 are based on very small sample sizes and should be interpreted with caution.

Probability of Success

The optimal target scores for math placement at JSU were estimated using logistic regression. Specifically, the most recent CollegeReady math test scores (as well as the ACT® mathematics test scores, for reference) associated with a 50 percent chance of earning a course grade of B or higher in lower-level and upper-level credit-bearing math courses were estimated. Table 5 contains the results of these analyses.

A score of 43 was estimated as the optimal target score for the lower-level, credit-bearing math courses, exactly the target score used at JSU. Students meeting this target score can avoid remedial math coursework, fulfilling one of JSU's objectives, and the 50 percent chance of earning a grade of B or higher in these math courses matches the standard that ACT has used for its College Readiness Benchmarks.³ Turning to the

Table 3. Academic Performance in First Math Course, Lower-Level, Credit-Bearing Math Courses

| Initial Math Test Score Range | Most Recent Math Test Score 43 to 79 | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | N | Course Grade C or Higher | Course Grade B or Higher |
| <43 | 13 | 77% | 69% |
| 43 to 79 | 103 | 71% | 55% |
| Total | 116 | 72% | 57% |

Note: Shaded area indicates students who raised their math scores enough to avoid remediation.

Table 4. Academic Performance in First Math Course, Upper-Level, Credit-Bearing Math Courses

| Initial Math Test Score Range | Most Recent Math Test Score 80+ | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | N | Course Grade C or Higher | Course Grade B or Higher |
| <43 | 8 | 63% | 38% |
| 43 to 79 | 87 | 95% | 84% |
| 80+ | 6 | 100% | 83% |
| Total | 101 | 93% | 80% |

Note: Shaded area indicates students who raised their math scores from 79 or lower to 80 or higher.

Table 5. Optimal Target Scores for Most Recent CollegeReady and ACT Mathematics Test Scores at JSU

| Level of Math Courses | Measure | N | Target Score | Probability of Earning a Grade of: | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | B or Higher | C or Higher |
| Lower | CollegeReady | 139 | 43 | .50 | .64 |
| Lower | ACT Mathematics | 188 | 17 | .50 | .68 |
| Upper | CollegeReady | 396 | 60 | .50 | .69 |
| Upper | ACT Mathematics | 511 | 20 | .50 | .74 |

upper-level math courses, the optimal target score was 60, 20 points below the target score set by JSU. However, JSU had intentionally set the target score for the upper-level math courses high because they wanted to be sure that students entering upper-level math courses were adequately prepared. Students who scored an 80 – the JSU recommended target score – on their most recent math test had a 69 percent chance of earning a grade of B or higher and an 84 percent chance of earning a grade of C or higher in the upper-level math courses. These high probabilities of success support JSU's decision to set high standards for placement into these courses.

Conclusions

The preliminary results from JSU are encouraging. Offering students the opportunity to work independently to improve their math skills before entering college leads to fewer students requiring remedial coursework and higher levels of success in credit-bearing math courses. Students who avoid remedial coursework increase their likelihood of persisting in their studies and ultimately earning a degree, as do students who earn higher grades in their first year of college. As more data becomes available, ACT will continue to evaluate whether these findings generalize to other higher education institutions. Specifically, as the

number of institutions implementing CollegeReady increases, ACT will analyze usage data to verify that the features of the CollegeReady system do, in fact, result in the intended outcomes, such as accurate course placement, gains in math and English knowledge and skills, as well as successful postsecondary course performance and completion.

Notes

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2. Barry, M. & Dannenberg, M. (2016). *Out of pocket: The high cost of inadequate high school student achievement on college affordability*. Washington, DC: Education Reform Now.

3. Allen, J., & Radunzel, J. (2017). *What are the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks?* Iowa City, IA: ACT. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/pdfs/R1670-college-readiness-benchmarks-2017-11.pdf>.