

11/9/12

Colleagues,

Last spring, Steve, Sally and I attended the 3CSN group at Pierce College and became acquainted with some of their leaders, their agenda and some of the accomplishments. Some of this we have embraced in the development of the CODAP, but there are other aspects of it that I think are highly questionable.

In this latter category I include the sort of advocacy coming from Katie Hern. To get a feeling of what she's about, watch the video at this web site:

<http://cap.3csn.org/2012/03/22/hern-speech-to-naleo/>

The blurb accompanying the video says,

“This 40-minute video captures Katie Hern’s speech at the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) California Statewide Policy Institute on Higher Education Success and Completion, March 9, 2012. In it, she demonstrates that long remedial sequences in English and Math are responsible for weeding out huge numbers of students at the very front door of the community college system. She also shows that students of color are disproportionately impacted by this system, because they are disproportionately placed into its lowest levels.

“Hern urges the group to pursue a 5-point agenda:

1. Set a statewide policy directive that limits the amount of time students spend in remediation
2. Incentivize colleges to develop accelerated pathways in Reading/Writing, ESL, and Math
3. Fund professional development to train faculty to develop and teach in new accelerated models
4. Maintain a commitment to access while increasing completion – we need to cut the lower levels from our remedial sequences, not the students unlucky enough to be placed there
5. Reject solutions focusing on the need for more and better placement testing, including “diagnostic testing”

“She also urges policy makers to dismantle two key lynchpins that hold up the current system: the use of standardized placement testing to track students into multi-level remedial sequences, and the CSU/UC systems’ requirement that any transferable math course have a pre-requisite of intermediate algebra, whether or not it is relevant to the college level course.”

This is a provocative piece and perhaps one of the most effective bits of advocacy for eliminating remediation that I’ve seen. I’d like to refute certain aspects of it.

Ms Hern, Ed.D., an English Instructor at Chabot College, claims that standardized placement tests are the lynchpin of the remediation systems at community colleges. “A student’s performance on these tests determines how far back she begins in the math/English/ESL sequences [...] and whether she can enroll in courses in other subjects.”

Technically, Title 5 would dispute this, since colleges are required to use “multiple measures” to place students in the curriculum, but the point is well taken, since many colleges tend to over-rely on these easy-to-administrate tools.

Hern observes that California spent \$1.8 million on placement tests in 2009-10, despite the fact that these tests are “notoriously weak predictors of student capacity.” Another point well-taken. In particular, the Accuplacer test has been rejected repeatedly over the last 14 years by the COD math faculty because, after studying it carefully, we found that, not only does it not match our curriculum, the questions are often of very poor quality – and the methodology of adaptive questions is a short-cut to get around the significant problems of assessment testing without addressing them.

Dr. Hern notes that “most of us never see these placement tests.” In fact, the Accuplacer tests are proprietary, so while you can see a sampling of them, you can’t actually view the entire thing.

She observes a sample from an Accuplacer practice test in sentence skills:

“SAMPLE #1

“Writing a best seller had earned the author a sum of money and had freed him from the necessity of selling his pen for the political purposes of others.

“Rewrite, beginning with

“The author was not obliged...

“The new sentence will include

“A) consequently he earned

B) because he had earned

C) by earning

D) as a means of earning”

I agree that this multiple choice problem exhibits very poor erudition and pedagogy, but that is typical of the poor quality of Accuplacer items. I also agree that “Placement tests are the single most high-stakes test a community college student will face [and that] students’ initial placement determines their likelihood of ever completing their educational goals...” Dr. Hern objects to the colloquialism of “selling one’s pen,” but I’ve never heard it either and yet it is easy for me to make sense of it. She also suggests that 18-year-olds will not be familiar with the ethical questions of selling one’s opinion for money. Really? It may take an EdD to know all about that.

However, that the Accuplacer is a poor placement test doesn’t mean students don’t need to remediate to prepare for college level courses. This is illogic, and I’m shocked to see such shoddy rhetoric exercised thusly by someone with a doctorate in education...ok, maybe “shocked” is an overstatement. “Not surprised” might be closer to the mark.

Hern then refers to a study done by the Community College Research Center (<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1030>) of 256,672 first time degree seeking students from 57 colleges participating in Achieving the Dream showing that 24% of students who place 3 or more levels below college on the placement exam successfully complete a college-level course, implying that this is a terrible outcome. But it is remarkable that ¼ of those students who failed to succeed in high school are capable of success in college.

When looking at just math placement results, the report claims that 10% of students who place 3 or more levels below college readiness on the placement exam go on to succeed in a college level math course. That may strike some as an unforgivably low proportion (certainly that is Dr. Hern's assessment), but it's 10% of a very large number of students and, as such in CA, is likely on a par with the total number of students who enroll directly in the UC from high school. Looked at from the perspective, again, it doesn't seem quite as dire as Dr. Hern makes it out to be – the community colleges are giving these large numbers of students a second chance and converting them from a non-educated underclass to those whose credentials will match with the top 10% of their high school class.

Dr. Hern segues from the sentence skills Accuplacer sample to show a slide (below) from the Accuplacer practice test in elementary algebra. She predictably gets chuckles from the elected officials in her audience. "Ok, here's your task," she taunts. "Simplify and write answers with positive exponents," she prods with a wink-wink nudge-nudge so typical of this group of anti-intellectuals that populate the EdD world.

"How many of you are college ready? One person from the Azusa unified School District by looking at this prompt thinks that she might be college ready. Ok, went to MIT. I'll just say, this is from an elementary algebra placement test, so two levels below, so you are not only not college ready you are two levels below, at least. I just want to say, I have two master's degrees and a doctorate, I don't even know what the directions mean."

Guffaws from the elected officials. "I have no idea what I'm supposed to do!" she delights. "So if I took this test, without having prepared in advance for it and reviewed all that algebra that I did very well at in my prior schooling, if I hadn't reviewed it, and I didn't know the stakes of the test, and that's how all of our students are taking these placement tests. They're not reviewing, they don't know the stakes. I'd be lucky to place at least two levels below."

MORE SAMPLE TEST ITEMS:

VIII. Exponents & polynomials

Simplify and write answers with positive exponents.

1. $(3x^2 - 5x - 6) + (5x^2 + 4x + 4)$

6. $\frac{24x^4 - 32x^3 + 16x^2}{8x^2}$

2. $\frac{(2a^{-5}b^4c^3)^{-2}}{(3a^3b^{-7}c^3)^2}$

7. $(x^2 - 5x)(2x^3 - 7)$

3. $(3x^0y^5z^6)(-2xy^3z^{-2})$

8. $\frac{26a^2b^{-5}c^9}{-4a^{-6}bc^9}$

4. $(-a^5b^7c^9)^4$

9. $(5a + 6)^2$

5. $(4x^2y^6z)^2(-x^{-2}y^3z^4)^6$

Accuplacer practice test in elementary algebra

This is a very sophisticated, well coordinated attack on the remedial curriculum. We need to be prepared to answer it. View the rest of the video to see her claim that non-STEM majors can do quite well in statistics without taking algebra...and the insidious way that she then insinuates this conclusion can easily be transported to the position that nobody needs remedial math...for any purpose. Hmmm.

Finally, I recommend you look at the rebuttal from Hunter Boylan and Alexander Goudas, “Knee-Jerk Reforms and Remediation that appeared in Inside Higher Ed last June:

<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/06/19/essay-flawed-interpretations-research-remedial-education>

This article effectively dismantles the Hern arguments and shows how utterly empty, flawed and dishonest they are.