

Reconceptualizing the Work of Assessment: Toward a Culture of Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article is an examination of the ‘not-so-new’ in developmental reading, including ages-old critiques of placement-testing processes in college reading contexts. Also included are solutions-oriented calls for a shift in how we in the field conceptualize reading assessment toward something much more than just placement testing. We argue, too, for a renewed focus on assessment for the purpose of inquiry. This renewed focus entails harnessing our professional curiosities toward asking questions about our students, their experiences and backgrounds, their needs, their goals, and the most effective ways to serve them. Toward such a reconceptualization of assessment, we take inspiration from Michele Simpson and Sherrie Nist’s foundational piece, published in 1992, “Toward Defining a Comprehensive Assessment Model for College Reading.” We have work to do in the field, particularly with how we think about assessment and evaluation, and we believe that moving toward a culture of inquiry will allow a productive space for this work to be initiated.

Within the context of current education reform efforts focused on college readiness, the need for developmental education coursework is being questioned. Finger-pointing debates abound, asking who is responsible for the supports needed to assist beginning college students deemed unready for the rigors of college. Assessment is at the heart of many of these debates and, in particular, placement testing is a major issue (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Fields & Parsad, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Rodriguez, Bowden,

Scott-Clayton, & Belfield, 2014). Indeed, both two- and four-year institutions continue to struggle to find ways to best place students in the scenario that will most likely lead to academic success.

According to Barnett and Reddy (2017), “an accurate placement mechanism will direct students who are college-ready into college-level coursework, while referring students who are academically underprepared to developmental coursework” (p. 3). In other words, the way placement testing is currently enacted limits its purpose to a tool for sorting

students into two categories: college-ready or not college-ready. A major complicating factor is that no single or universal definition of “college-ready” exists, making a simple or obvious approach to placement protocol unlikely (Flippo, Armstrong, & Schumm, 2018).

This discussion is particularly relevant in the case of college/developmental reading, an area currently struggling with continued practical improvements, despite major policy-driven reductions (Stahl & Armstrong, 2018). These concerns about placement testing are not new. In fact, although they are presently coming from those outside the field, they have historically come from experts within the field of college reading (Flippo & Schumm, 2009; Maxwell, 1997; Simpson & Nist, 1992). Indeed, as Simpson and Nist (1992) have lamented, “college reading programs have been slow or reluctant to examine traditional assessment methods” (p. 452). Their solution was a “comprehensive assessment model for college reading,” which was a philosophically matched, multiple-measures, principled approach that drew upon sound assessment concepts (p. 452). Simpson and Nist did not stop at placement testing, but instead moved beyond toward a much broader understanding of “multidimensional” assessment, which yielded information to “be viewed as an integral part of the instructional process that informs and empowers students and instructors” (p. 453).

With these and other of the field’s past efforts in mind, we take a critical perspective on current issues related to reading assessment in college, especially placement testing. Therefore, in this article, our aim is to present a brief overview of some of the existing arguments regarding developmental reading placement and assessment, and then move into a solutions-oriented discussion that focuses on the intersections between philosophy underlying developmental education and what is known about assessment in reading. In addition, we

propose a rethinking of the purpose of assessment, including placement testing. We call instead for a culture of inquiry that entails using assessment as a means of supporting students’ academic success through a combination of interventions that include academic and social supports. Because we are literacy professionals, not assessment generalists, our positionality will be of an exclusively literacy stance even though we recognize that many current conversations encompass all discipline/subject areas associated with developmental education. We begin with an overview of the present critiques of typical placement processes in order to situate our argument; however, our goal is to avoid any in-depth rehashing of these arguments because we feel this has been sufficiently published and discussed. Instead, our primary goal in this article is to turn attention toward thinking about solutions.

Criticisms of Placement Processes

Placement testing practices have been widely criticized for years, from field experts and external entities alike. Although concerns abound, in general the issues tend to involve three major critiques: an overreliance on single-measure test protocols, an exclusive focus on cognitive aspects, and a mismatched definition of reading. In the following sections, we introduce briefly each one of these critiques in turn, addressing both current and past discussions. Following this, we extend these three critiques to include our own major concern about the present state of college reading placement testing.

Critique 1: Overreliance on Single-Measure Protocols

With regard to placement testing for college reading, single-measure protocols remain the predominant approach. According to Fields and Parsad (2012), as recently as 2011, only 13% of institutions were using anything other than just a single reading

measure to place students. Although research suggests that a high school grade point average provides useful information for placement decisions and should be used as an additional measure, many colleges and universities still use a single standardized testing method for placing students (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Burdman, 2012; Guha, Wagner, Darling-Hammond, Taylor, & Curtis, 2018; Hodara, Jaggars, & Karp, 2012; Noble & Sawyer, 2004). This critique is certainly not new, as field experts have noted the problems with using a single-measure placement protocol for reading for years (Maxwell, 1997; Simpson, Stahl, & Francis, 2004).

Critique 2: Exclusive Focus on Cognitive Aspects

It really should come as no surprise that calls from within the field of developmental education have emphasized the need for affective or non-cognitive influences (Bliss, 2001; Boylan, 2009; Maxwell, 1979; Roueche & Kirk, 1973; Saxon, Levine-Brown, & Boylan, 2008). Specific to reading, research across grade levels has identified affective characteristics as important correlates of reading (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Henk, Marinak, & Melnik, 2012; O'Brien & Dillon, 2008). More recent higher education research reveals that this need is especially important for underrepresented groups; for instance, in Ramsey's (2008) work with Gates Millennium Scholars, non-cognitive measures have shown promise in regard to student outcomes and in improving access and success. Non-cognitive influences include self-directed effort, ability to build and maintain healthy social relationships, and judgment and decision-making abilities (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Critique 3: Mismatched Definition of Reading

In general, reading is difficult to define. For example, Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) stated, "at different historical times,

reading has been defined by referring to specific skills such as reading the Bible, understanding, or answering questions about a text" (p. 347). Specific to postsecondary reading placement, a serious challenge is the lack of a consistent and concise definition of the very construct that standardized instruments purport to measure: reading comprehension. Beyond that, an additional problem of content validity arises when definitions of reading implicit in these instruments are not aligned with the way reading is enacted in college courses.

The College Board's description of what the ACCUPLACER™ aims to do serves here as an exemplar:

Assesses the test-taker's ability to derive meaning from a range of texts and to determine the meaning of words and phrases in short and extended contexts. Passages on the test cover a range of content areas, writing modes, and complexities. (College Board, 2018)

Based on this description of ACCUPLACER™, reading can be understood as text-bound. Missing is the students' opportunity to support their understanding of the text, which might reveal a rather sophisticated level of reasoning, comprehension, and vocabulary use—all skills that are beneficial and expected in a post-secondary setting (Bosley, 2016; Petrosky, 1982). Furthermore, in most college classes, students will rarely be expected to arrive at a single meaning of a text. Instead, multiple interpretations and critical reading, involving analysis and synthesis, are more commonly expected and encouraged.

In short, there is a mismatch between definitions of reading in practice and those implicit in testing instruments; a review of most postsecondary-specific reading test descriptions will likely yield such a realization (Flippo, Armstrong, & Schumm, 2018; Flippo & Schumm, 2009). The mismatching of definitions of reading that are implicit within many test instruments versus those enacted in

practice creates a wedge between the instruments used and how professionals match students with the best supports to help them succeed.

Critique 4: Beyond the Big Three

In addition to the three recurring critiques above, we present our own concern with the current state of placement testing for college reading, a concern not included in the present debates. Namely, placement testing exists presently as an entity completely separate from most college/developmental reading curriculum and instruction. Indeed, in many cases, assessment is not only conceptually divorced from instruction, but also geographically as well, as placement instruments are often housed in a testing center elsewhere on campus. In many cases, faculty are unable to access placement test results, which could give faculty a better understanding of students' strengths and needs for instruction. In other words, as Simpson and Nist (1992) described it, assessment in college reading has taken on a role of being "only an accountability issue—a means to an end—with the end being an improved score on a standardized reading test" (p. 452). However, as field professionals, we understand that "the end product of assessment in the content classroom, or any classroom for that matter, should be instructional decision making" (Bean, Readence, & Dunkerly-Bean, 2017, p. 96). Unfortunately, current placement testing procedures at the college level do not speak to instructional areas.

A Conceptual and Philosophical Shift

In sum, the first three critiques introduced in the previous section are widely known at this point, and our purpose in this article is not to merely catalogue the problems with placement testing. However, as evidenced by field experts' concerns across the years about these very same issues, these

are not new issues. Indeed, these issues have been on the radar of developmental education and college reading scholars for years. The question is why hasn't there been movement toward solutions in practice? One way of responding may be as simple as tradition.

It seems likely that higher education—at least in areas related to college/developmental reading—may have adopted what some scholars refer to negatively as either a culture of testing or a culture of assessment. According to Fuller (2013), the latter term was "popularly theorized by noted assessment scholar, Trudy Banta (2002)" (p. 20). As Fuller relays, "a culture of assessment is the primary and often unexplored system undergirding assessment practice on a campus" (p. 20). Others have distinguished assessment culture from testing culture (Birenbaum, 2016). Indeed, an exhaustive review will reveal that there are multiple interpretations and usages of these and other related terms. However, the fundamental problems inherent are similar. When testing becomes engrained in an educational system, it becomes part of the culture that is simply accepted, not questioned, and is therefore legitimized. Calling on reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu, for instance, Moses and Nanna (2007) explained that:

The legitimizing forces of expert approval and validation, societal acceptance, institutionalized testing policies, as well as the testing mechanisms themselves, work together within a culture to perpetuate existing symbolic connections between testing and knowledge in ways that are neither justified nor sound. Testing, once accepted within a culture, is reproduced as a legitimate and meaningful representation like any other culturally specific tradition. (p. 64)

Certainly, there have been attempts to reframe this approach to assessment, regardless of the term applied: Eisgruber (2012) talked about a "culture of engagement," for example. Despite pushback from theoreticians,

scholars, and researchers outside the field of developmental education, highly questionable placement testing practices and highly suspect and limiting conceptualizations about testing persist—stubbornly. It is generally a given that professionals from instructors and advisers to testing center managers and college administrators all acknowledge the problems with how college students are assessed for reading, yet few changes are made in practice. It seems that the field is trapped in a culture of testing that translates to a culture of sorting. We argue that, in part, this is because the field is so focused on placement testing as the primary need—an activity that must happen quickly, inexpensively, and for a great number of students each year.

Like Simpson and Nist (1992) and others who have pushed for solutions in the past, however, we aim toward a reconceptualization of the work of assessment related to college/developmental reading. Our focus on the work of assessment is deliberate, as it is clear that years and years of theorizing best practices have not yielded the kind of widespread change so badly needed. Instead, we suggest moving toward a culture of inquiry—a way of conceiving of assessment for college/developmental reading that is grounded in the guiding philosophies of developmental education, our professional and scholarly understanding of what reading is and is not, and our existing knowledge base about reading assessment. Such a shift in culture would necessarily entail harnessing our professional curiosities toward asking questions about our students, their experiences and backgrounds, their needs, their goals, and, the most effective ways to serve them. In other words, rather than simply positioning students into the dichotomous categorization of “college-ready” or “not college-ready,” genuine questions—why? how? for how long? to what end? with what goals?—must be asked.

What we are proposing is not new. We are calling for a philosophical reconceptualization toward a comprehensive assessment and evaluation model that includes but is not limited to placement testing. We advocate for seeking to understand the whole learner, seeking to bridge assessment with curriculum and instruction, and seeking to inform a continued evaluation protocol. We urge professionals to be curious about where students are in their literacy learning, where they need to be, what types of supports are most appropriate, and how to ensure they have benefitted from those supports. In short, we encourage inquiry.

Toward a Culture of Inquiry in College Reading

We call upon Simpson and Nist (1992) to inform our suggested conceptual and philosophical shift. Although neither our recommendations—nor theirs—are exclusively tied to the big three critiques of current placement testing practices, we begin there. First, Simpson and Nist recognized the problem of a single-measure placement but extended it to acknowledge that one test score is often used “not only to place and diagnose incoming students but also to evaluate program effectiveness” (p. 452). Second, they acknowledged the need for a multiple-measures approach to account for “both affective and cognitive domains” (p. 455). And, third, they noted the critical need in a comprehensive model for a match to exist “between the philosophical base, the short- and long-term goals of the reading program, and the assessment instruments used” (p. 453). Their recommendations, still appropriate more than 25 years later, were driven by a need to understand, inform, and evaluate—not simply to categorize, label, and register students. In defining assessment to extend the operational definition beyond merely placement testing, and toward something far

more comprehensive, they drew upon Cross and Paris's (1987) triad of assessment purposes: sorting, diagnosing, and evaluating. Furthermore, they contended that these data be used not only to assess students, but also to inform instruction.

Although Simpson and Nist (1992) shared a specific working model in practice at that time at the University of Georgia, we do not advocate for any single, specific working model. Rather, we argue for a broader-level change that includes field-wide reconceptualization and reconsideration of the philosophies behind what college/developmental reading professionals do—including those that are merely traditions, with no real pedagogical rationale behind them. We believe that this shift in thinking—toward a culture of inquiry—is what is needed to initiate the kinds of conversations that can bring forth meaningful change in assessment.

Toward this end, in the next three sections, we contemplate the possibility for a culture of inquiry in the field. This possibility could become reality if the field as a whole stops relying exclusively on others, including corporate test publishers and state or institutional mandates, to define “college ready” for reading. Instead, the field must draw upon its own collective expertise. Specifically, we call upon expertise informed by the philosophical roots of developmental education, a theory- and experience-driven understanding of what reading is or is not, and key principles of reading assessment. All of this is situated in our call for a conceptual shift toward a culture of inquiry. In the next three sections, we offer resources to exemplify how we as a field might allow these three areas of extant knowledge in the field to guide thinking.

Drawing on Developmental Education Philosophies

Those of us in the field of developmental education tend to identify ourselves as being

focused on the whole learner. Indeed, the roots of developmental education are in cognitive and developmental psychology and learning theory (Arendale, 2007; Boylan & Saxon, 1998; Maxwell, 1997; Spann & McCrimmon, 1998), and are learner-centered in nature. As Boylan and Saxon (1998) noted:

The term ‘developmental education’ reflects a dramatic expansion in our knowledge of human growth and development in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, we began to understand that poor academic performance involved far more complex factors than a student’s being unable to solve for x in an algebraic equation or write a complete sentence using proper grammar. (p. 7)

Similarly, Maxwell (1997) commented on the field’s “commitment to educate disadvantaged and ethnic groups that are underrepresented in academe” (p. 25). Especially given the philosophical roots of developmental education to aim for equity in access to college, concerns about the current approach to placement testing come to light, as Ramsey (2008) has noted: “traditional assessment methods overlook the challenges many students face in gaining access to college, thus perpetuating the cycle of inequality” (p. 12). Reimagining placement testing as more than a means of sorting students into and out of developmental education courses opens doors of opportunity for students to benefit from needed supports. At its core, then, this is an issue of access.

One specific suggestion for college/developmental reading professionals is to begin by drawing upon the student-centered philosophies and equity-focused and access-oriented aims of developmental education’s rich history in reconceptualizing an assessment approach. Many resources exist within the field that can inform in this area (see edited volumes by Boylan & Bonham, 2014; Higbee, Lundell, & Arendale, 2005; Lundell & Higbee, 2001, 2002). This suggestion has implications for the field as a

whole, including curriculum and instruction, but specific to assessment, it involves rewriting the narrative that placement testing is an isolated area of assessment. Instead, field professionals need to conceive of something much larger that allows for understanding the whole learner via broader, multiple-measured protocols that encompass both cognitive and affective instruments.

Drawing on a Professional and Scholarly Understanding of What Reading Is and Is Not

Getting policy makers to accept the idea that reading development is not only contextually situated, but also lifelong in nature (Alexander, 2006) is a challenge that postsecondary literacy experts continue to face. Another challenge that further complicates this discussion is a view of reading as a set of visible skills, especially since most standardized, commercial reading test instruments currently in use tend toward assessing discrete skills. However, given that entire volumes have been devoted to theorizing reading over the years (e.g., Alvermann, Unrau, & Ruddell, 2013; Alvermann, Unrau, Sailors, & Ruddell, 2019; see also Tracey & Morrow, 2017), literacy professionals have an expansive body of scholarship from which to draw.

Reading comprehension scholarship specific to the postsecondary level emphasizes students' abilities to interact with or interpret a text through the use of cognitive, metacognitive, and self-regulatory strategies (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009; Holschuh & Lampi, 2018; Paulson & Holschuh, 2018). Further, college/developmental reading scholarship highlights both contextual and language-development factors that must be taken into account (Bean, Gregory, & Dunkerly-Bean, 2018; Francis & Simpson, 2018). Such theoretical work can be foundational for developing a guiding theory of reading for curriculum design and instructional implementation.

Drawing on Existing Knowledge about Reading Assessment

The overall discipline of literacy education has a tremendous amount of collective knowledge about assessment in general (Flippo, 2014; Guthrie & Lissitz, 1985; Haladyna, 2002; McKenna & Stahl, 2009). Although much of this work tends to be focused on PreK-12 contexts, general principles can certainly inform the work of assessment at the postsecondary level.

Translating what we know about what reading is or is not to placement-testing purposes, a meaningful conceptualization of reading would include a combination of what students already know to do with text and how they employ strategies connected to a particular purpose and context that resembles actual literacy practices students will face in their college-level courses. However, arriving at an informed understanding of what those practices look like may require a curriculum audit (Armstrong, Stahl, & Kantner, 2015, 2016). Only with an understanding of the local conceptions of reading, in terms of expectations and actual practices, can college/developmental reading professionals design curricula for key transitional experiences, such as developmental reading coursework, literacy tutoring, or reading labs. And only then, armed with sound literacy theory and an institutional definition of college-ready for reading, can purposeful placement testing be developed.

Beyond Sorting: Assessment for Multiple Inquiries

The near-exclusive focus on placement testing as assessment in college/developmental reading, we contend, is an overly narrow and short-sighted one, particularly if one holds an inquiry perspective. Especially given the overwhelming attention being paid, over the last 15 years or so, to questioning the efficacy

of developmental education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Complete College America 2011, 2012; Jenkins, Jaggars, & Roksa, 2009; Martorell & McFarlin, 2007; Vandal, 2010; Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasknik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004; Zachry Rutschow & Schneider, 2011), the need for evaluation of instruction becomes evident. Thus, our call is for a redefinition of assessment and evaluation that is inquiry-driven and guided by purpose, institutional mission, student needs, and available interventions.

To highlight our call, we offer Figure 1, which is a general model for assessment and evaluation based on a culture of inquiry. Our model for assessment and evaluation intentionally does not prescribe a means or tool for enactment, as it is clear that many

ways that guide instruction and support for students.

It is necessary to revisit Barnett and Reddy's (2017) definition of placement if the plan is to move beyond a sorting-focused system. First, although general definitions from the field are useful starting points, there is a need for institutional definitions that are aligned to research if the goal is to move toward an inquiry-based assessment system. Institutional or mission-driven definitions of placement testing allow for local input and the development of a system that considers the actual students who will be taking the placement test and attending the school. Furthermore, a local definition also serves as a system of checks and balances for institutions where the mission is to support underserved students who are more likely to be affected by

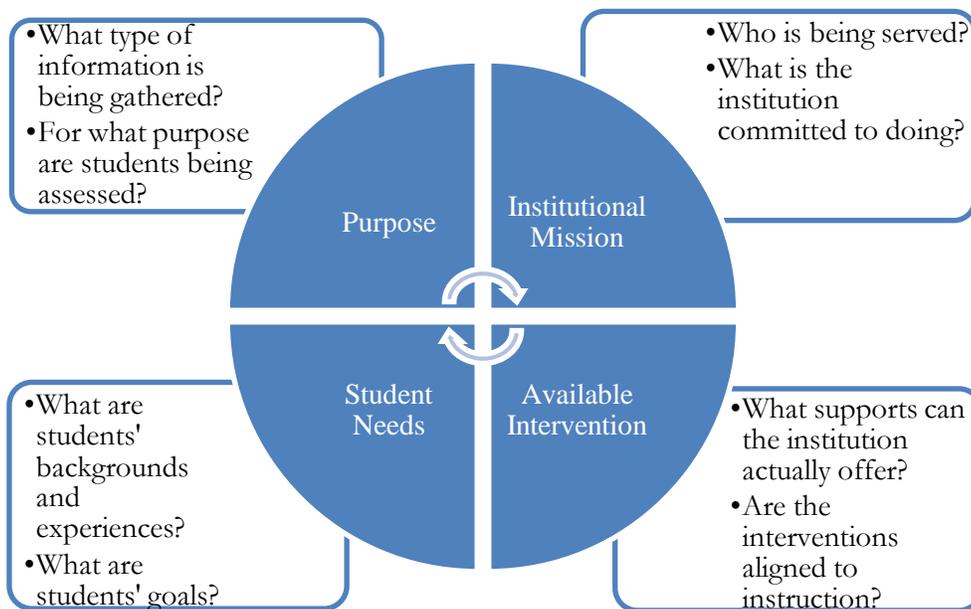


Figure 1. Model for Inquiry-Based Assessment

institutions do not have the available resources or flexibility to develop assessment tools and must rely on existing tools. However, we call for institutions to at least imagine the ways student success can be impacted by simply shifting to a culture of inquiry and away from a culture of sorting. There are indeed possibilities for using existing assessment tools in more thoughtful

placement tests and developmental education.

Reiterated in Barnett, Bergman, Kopko, Reddy, Belfield, Roy, and Cullinan (2018), standardized assessment tools are not the most reliable when determining the likelihood of student success in college-level courses. Specifically, Barnett et. al. (2018) state, "Placement test scores are not highly correlated with success in initial college-level

courses: Doing poorly on a placement test does not reliably indicate that a student would be unsuccessful in a college-level course” (p. 5). We argue that much of the issue with a sorting-driven placement system is that it is limited in scope. The goal of the assessment tool is simply to provide a snapshot of students’ skills at that point in time and on that particular set of questions. Not captured are epistemological beliefs, attitude, or self-regulatory behaviors, which are better indicators of success (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009).

An inquiry-driven assessment model would incorporate an examination of students’ academic skills and knowledge, captured over time, and students’ needs based on trends and a consideration of preparation based on what is known about where students come from and what they need for the next level. Such a model would also allow for faculty engagement in the placement process so that assessment data can inform what happens at the program and the classroom level. We urge field professionals to not only change placement protocols, but also to use the information gained through placement testing in new ways. Assessment for assessment’s sake simply gives a bit of information about our students. However, if it does not translate into action or align to student outcomes, then we are not serving the students admitted to schools, but rather moving them through a system.

Unfortunately, as Boylan and Bonham (2009) have noted, most college reading professionals are not specifically trained to do these investigations; for that reason, the authors note, those in the field need to become familiar with this body of literature and standard practices (p. 403). As well, most research in this area has not accounted for what Simpson (2002) referred to as “a constellation of dependent variables” including issues of strategy-adaptation and transfer (Simpson, 2002, p. 2). Grubb (2001) has further noted that:

We need a more systematic collection of outcome measures, but these measures need to include more than test scores of basic skills. Such measures should include persistence in college and completion of degrees, writing portfolios, and completion of occupational courses. (p. 19)

For this and other reasons, program-level assessment and evaluation often get relegated to the realm of a necessary evil. The problem with such a conceptualization is that it will drive not only how the investigation is structured, but also the rigor with which it is undertaken, and the extent to which any findings are used for programmatic improvement. One commonly heard argument among college reading professionals is that such program evaluation is driven for and by administrators with little or no real impact on curricular matters. In practice, this is all too often the reality. However, done well and with a student-centered approach, program-level assessment is critical inquiry to inform continued curricular growth and improvement. Grubb (2001), for example, made a distinction between the metaphor of a “black box,” which does not provide information on improvement, and a “Pandora’s box,” which reveals problems and reasons why these are problems as well as suggestions for improving. It is toward this goal of an abundance of information for answering and asking questions that we aim.

Conclusion

In the context of higher education, conversations questioning placement-testing practices are sometimes viewed as an attack on developmental education because the two are so intertwined. Because placement testing practices are currently viewed as methods for placing students—or not—into developmental education courses, when research or policy makers question placement-testing practices, it may be perceived as a

questioning of the integrity of the field of developmental education and its many dedicated professionals. The problem is that, more often than not, developmental education professionals have no input on placement practices.

We have work to do in the field, particularly with how we think about assessment and evaluation, and this is important work that we need to claim and initiate as professionals and experts in this

field. As Grubb (2001) has noted, “dedication and student-centeredness, while necessary, may not be sufficient, so a program of evaluation and improvement is central to improving the performance of students” (p. 35). Here, Simpson and Nist’s (1992) comprehensive assessment model offers us an entry point. However, in 2018, as in 1992, it can’t take us all the way, as the real changes needed are to the way we conceive of the purpose, goals, and power of assessment.

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