Guided Self-Placement Principles

BACKGROUND

The Michigan Reconnect Grant Act (April 2020) required that a working group be convened to study developmental education and placement policies and make recommendations to help the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO):

1. Identify placement practices and policies that ensure students know when remediation is required, what types of academic and nonacademic supports will be available during remediation, and when they can expect to complete credit-bearing English and mathematics courses. Policies must emphasize placement in college-level courses for as many students as possible, with students requiring remediation being placed in appropriate programs.

2. Encourage eligible institutions across this state to adopt consistent placement policies.

3. Clearly communicate sound policies for course placement and options for remedial courses.

Between March and June 2021, a 30-member working group including representatives from the governor’s office, the legislature, community colleges, the Department of Education, the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, secondary schools, nonprofit organizations, the United States Department of Labor’s Office of Apprenticeship, and the business community met to study policies and make recommendations. The overall goal was to recommend policies and practices for Michigan community colleges that will place as many students as possible into college-level courses, ensure students have access to remediation that complies with the Section 3(c)(v) of the Michigan Reconnect Grant act by January 1, 2022, and make transparent to students when they can expect to complete credit-bearing English and mathematics courses.

The group recommended that students be placed into gateway English Composition and mathematics pathway courses by default with high school GPA used to make an initial determination of the appropriate level of corequisite or other support. The group also recommended that for students who do not have a high school GPA, who graduated from high school more than 10 years ago, or who have questions about their options, a Guided Self-Placement (GSP) process should be offered to help students determine whether to elect or decline support for the gateway course(s).

Understanding that GSP must be designed and implemented with great care to avoid students being harmed rather than helped by the process, the recommendations also called for a working group on GSP to help equip colleges with guidance to design and implement high-quality, equitable GSP policies and processes.

LEO released the Michigan Developmental Education and Placement Recommendations (MDEPR) on June 30, 2021. In September 2021, the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) at the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) convened a statewide workgroup to provide guidelines to help colleges develop and implement high-quality, equitable GSP approaches. The workgroup was composed of K-12 and college practitioners including faculty, advisors, and administrators. The intent of this
A workgroup was to identify promising practices for designing and delivering asset-based GSP policies and processes to increase the total number of students completing program-applicable gateway English Composition and mathematics pathway courses within their first year of enrollment while reducing or eliminating equity gaps associated with race, age and gender.

ABOUT GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT

In the MDEPR, GSP is defined as a tool or process that allows students, in consultation with counselors or faculty, to determine suitable coursework and level of support in program-applicable gateway mathematics and English Composition courses. GSP has been used and studied more widely in English than in mathematics, and more often in four-year rather than two-year institutions. In developing the guidelines in this document, MCSS collaborated with researchers familiar with GSP and drew on examples of policy and practice from community colleges in Colorado, Maryland and New Jersey. It is clear from the information gathered by the workgroup that Michigan community colleges will be at the leading edge of the field in adopting GSP at scale. Ongoing evaluation that includes both qualitative and quantitative data will be crucial for 1) determining whether the effort is achieving its goals and 2) informing continuous improvement efforts as the knowledge-base evolves and more evidence emerges about the impacts and outcomes of GSP on student enrollment, persistence, and completion.

GSP represents a fundamental shift in institutional policy, practice, and mindset. In traditional placement processes, test scores such as SAT, Accuplacer or ALEKS or a specific high school GPA are used by the college to evaluate student readiness for college level courses and assign students either directly to gateway English or mathematics courses or to one of potentially several levels of developmental education coursework. In contrast, GSP prioritizes learner agency and focuses on providing students with information about course options, performance expectations and available support, along with opportunities to reflect on their past academic experiences. GSP may include online questionnaires or other tools along with consultation with faculty and/or advisors. Ultimately, the student -- not the institution -- makes the final decision regarding their course and support selections. For GSP to be equitably designed and implemented, care must be taken to prevent students from historically marginalized backgrounds, including students from low-income backgrounds and students of color from being further undermined rather than aided by the process.

GSP: GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT

LEO: MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

MDEPR: MICHIGAN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION AND PLACEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS
GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT AND THE MDEPR

The guidelines in this document have been developed to be used exclusively within the context of the MDEPR. Specifically, this means:

1. Colleges using these guidelines have adopted a policy of default placement into gateway English Composition and mathematics pathways courses, with corequisite support as needed, for the vast majority of students.

2. Colleges using these guidelines have adopted corequisite support courses at scale for the gateway English Composition and mathematics pathway courses where GSP will be used.

3. Colleges using these guidelines have adopted a high school GPA of at least 2.5 as the benchmark for enrolling into gateway English Composition of mathematics pathway courses without support. Using the GPA as a “first cut” simplifies the process for students and reduces the administrative burden on colleges.

4. Colleges using these guidelines should make multiple sources of information available to students in order to guide their decision process.

5. Colleges using these guidelines ensure that the GSP process is transparent and allows students ample opportunity to make an informed decision while not being onerous or confusing to complete.

*Fig. 1: Role of GSP in the Placement Process in MDEPR*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Default Placement</th>
<th>Role of GSP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students with a recent* GPA of greater than or equal to 2.5</td>
<td>Gateway course without corequisite support</td>
<td><strong>Optionally</strong>: To recommend the appropriate level of corequisite support (if any)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with a recent* GPA of less than 2.5</td>
<td>Gateway course with corequisite support</td>
<td><strong>Mandatory</strong>: To recommend the appropriate level of corequisite support (if any)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students without a recent GPA</td>
<td>Gateway course with corequisite support</td>
<td><strong>Mandatory</strong>: To recommend the appropriate level of corequisite support (if any)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All students have the option to choose any level of corequisite support or to take a math course that is beyond the gateway level following completion of a GSP process.

*Recent defined as less than 10 years old

Within the context of the MDEPR, GSP is intended to be available to all students who wish to explore their options related to gateway course completion.
PRINCIPLES OF GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT

A set of five principles associated with good practice in designing, implementing and evaluating a GSP process. Each principle is presented with explanations including rationale, risks and implications for practice.

1. INSTITUTIONS DEVELOP AND ADMINISTER AN ASSET-BASED PROCESS TO HELP STUDENTS MAKE INFORMED CHOICES REGARDING COURSE SELECTION AND PROVISION OF SUPPORT IN GATEWAY ENGLISH COMPOSITION AND MATHEMATICS PATHWAY COURSES.

Details: An asset based GSP process is aligned with the institution's curriculum and the skills students need to successfully complete programs of study. The process includes detailed information about the academic expectations in each of the program-applicable gateway courses and describes any available support such as corequisite courses, student success courses, coaching, tutoring, or supplemental instruction. Students who elect to participate in GSP are prompted to review multiple sources of information\(^1\) about their academic history and to reflect on their goals, strengths and life experiences to inform their course and support choices.

Rationale: GSP is a response to recent research suggesting that scores on traditional placement tests such as Accuplacer and other high-stakes tests such as SAT do not accurately reflect students’ ability to successfully complete gateway courses. Institutions should include a variety of measures that students can consider in making choices as the validity of placement decisions that emerge from GSP processes will depend to a great extent on the initial assumptions of the instruments used to structure the processes.

\(^1\) Information about past academic experiences can include, but are not limited to:

- a) SAT scores
- b) ACT scores
- c) Length of enrollment and curriculum in a U.S. or international high school
- d) Completed U.S. or international high school coursework, especially in mathematics
- e) U.S. or international high school grades
- f) U.S. military transcripts
- g) Prior learning assessment or credit, including CLEP
- h) GED
- i) ESL placement survey
- j) Adult education or foreign institution transcripts
- k) ACCUPLACER
- l) ALEKS
- m) Non-cognitive instruments
Risks: Students may have biases that shape their perspectives on their academic histories, for example, giving undue weight to negative experiences or test scores. Individuals advising students may exhibit implicit or explicit bias in making recommendations to students, and students may misinterpret guidance or recommendations as requirements.

Implications for Practice: All materials related to the GSP process should be reviewed for potential bias, and all individuals advising or teaching students should receive anti-bias training. Every effort should be made to minimize reliance on high-stakes test scores that may replicate systemic bias.

2. **STUDENTS MAKE THE FINAL SELECTION OF THEIR INITIAL PROGRAM-APPLICABLE ENGLISH COMPOSITION AND MATHEMATICS PATHWAY COURSES AND WHETHER TO ELECT OR DECLINE ANY AVAILABLE SUPPORT.**

Details: Students have the option to participate in a GSP process designed to inform them about their choices for program-applicable English Composition and mathematics pathway courses, along with available support, and to make the final decision regarding selection of course(s) and support. This process is designed to maximize the opportunities for students to complete gateway mathematics and English Composition courses within their first year of enrollment.

Rationale: A student-centered GSP process is intended to empower students and promote a sense of agency and belonging. It also recognizes that students bring valuable knowledge of themselves to the course placement process. Students who elect to participate in a corequisite course or other support options may be more engaged than if they were assigned to that support by mandatory placement.

Risks: Although the GSP process is designed to center student agency, there is a risk that students will underplace themselves or elect unnecessary support due to past experiences, including explicit or implicit bias or internalized stereotype threat. There is also a risk of students misunderstanding placement recommendations as requirements.

Implications for Practice: Institutions should pay careful attention to messaging in designing and administering the GSP process. A process that does not result in the student making the final selection of course and support is not a GSP process. Individuals advising students should be provided with professional development to mitigate potential instances of bias.

3. **FACULTY AND STAFF COLLABORATE IN THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND REFINEMENT OF SUPPORTS AND GSP POLICIES AND PRACTICES.**

Details: Faculty from the English and mathematics disciplines are actively involved in the design of the GSP process to ensure its alignment with relevant course curricula. Additionally,
collaboration extends beyond developmental and gateway mathematics and English faculty to include faculty representation from programs of study leading to transfer and/or direct entry into the workforce. It also includes staff from departments that help administer or support student registration and enrollment including advising, student success, enrollment management and IT.

Rationale: GSP requires a change in student registration and advising processes that affects many departments. A cross-functional team of faculty content experts, advising personnel and academic and student services administrators will ensure a strong connection between the GSP process, gateway course content and the curricula of the institution’s programs of study.

Risks: The GSP process may replicate existing institutional silos between developmental education and the institution's programs of study, causing the process to fail to increase equitable opportunity to complete program-applicable gateway courses. Those designing the process, as well as those advising or teaching students, may experience conscious or unconscious bias. Additionally, without engagement of stakeholders from across departments, students may receive mixed communication about the GSP process. A lack of representation on the design team may result in a lack of buy-in to the GSP process from faculty, those advising students, and other stakeholders.

Implications for Practice: All involved should receive training and ongoing support as the GSP process is implemented. Training should emphasize mindset shifts supporting the importance of student agency in the learning journey and the overall goal of increasing equitable opportunities to complete programs of study for all students.

4. INFORMATION ABOUT GATEWAY COURSE OPTIONS, PLACEMENT, AND PROVISION OF SUPPORT ARE EXPLICITLY DEFINED AND ARE EASY TO ACCESS, UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE FOR ALL STUDENTS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS.

Details: Policies are visible on the institution’s website and consistently communicated through multiple channels to students as well as partners from K-12 and the community. Developing and reviewing placement policies represents an opportunity to improve communication with students.

Rationale: Helping students see themselves as agents in their own educational outcomes must start from students understanding their options. Transparent communication helps ensure that students understand their role in the GSP process and the implications of selecting gateway courses and electing or declining to enroll in support courses. Additionally, positioning course placement within a policy framework focused on supporting completion of gateway courses and eliminating equity gaps in program enrollment and completion will define the institution’s commitment to equity, provide structure for institutional actors and help to communicate the
purpose of the student-centered GSP process to both internal and external partners and stakeholders.

Risks: Inadequate communication of policy goals and implications of the GSP process may leave students confused and hesitant to act in their own best interests. Students may misunderstand recommendations as requirements. Staff may offer conflicting guidance on placement and student options.

Implications for Practice: Web pages with information about accelerated models of developmental education and the GSP process should be maintained and updated regularly. Institutions should ensure that all information is compliant with ADA specifications. Individuals advising students should receive regular updates regarding any changes in the GSP process, academic program requirements or available support structures.

5. THE GSP PROCESS AND POLICIES ARE EVALUATED, REVIEWED, AND REVISED ON A REGULAR BASIS.

Details: Evaluation of GSP processes and policies includes disaggregated quantitative data on the numbers of students who elect to take gateway courses with support or without support, successful gateway course completion (with C or better), and persistence beyond the gateway course. Evaluation should also include information on the implementation process and the perspectives of students, those who advise them, and those who teach them. Institutions should also monitor their overall progress in closing equity gaps in enrollment and completion of programs of study, transfer and other long-term outcomes.

Rationale: GSP is a relatively new process and research in the field is ongoing. Michigan colleges are early adopters of GSP at scale for both mathematics pathways and English Composition courses. Regular review and evaluation will ensure that the process is working as intended to increase opportunities for all students to complete gateway courses within one year of enrollment and to close equity gaps.

Risks: Without regular review and evaluation, institutions implementing GSP will be increasingly subject to the risks enumerated in Principles 1-4, including bias, misunderstanding and lack of clarity.

Implications for Practice: Build resources for intentional review and evaluation components into the initial design of the Guided Self-Placement process. Maintain a cross-functional team, including representation from students who have experienced the process, to conduct the evaluation, and share the results widely with stakeholders.
NEXT STEPS

There are at least three crucial recommendations for state-level support for GSP and corequisite developmental education at community colleges.

1. Provide a set of training workshops for college leaders, faculty and advising staff to support the development and implementation of a high quality GSP process.

2. Facilitate an ongoing community of practice including mentorship, peer-to-peer networking and access to expert resources for college leaders, faculty and advising staff related to GSP and corequisite delivery of support for gateway English Composition and mathematics pathway courses.

3. Support ongoing evaluation of GSP and the MDEPR more generally by revising STARR data collection criteria to include numbers of demographic information about students who do and do not successfully complete program-applicable gateway English Composition and mathematics pathway courses within their first year of enrollment at a community college.

GUIDED SELF-PLACEMENT RESOURCES

Please visit the Michigan Developmental Education and Placement Recommendations Support page on the MCSS website for additional information and resources.
## MCSS Guided Self-Placement Workgroup Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jenny Schanker</th>
<th>Leanne Allvin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Center for Student Success</td>
<td>Macomb Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn Coleman</td>
<td>Jeremy Belanger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleman Evaluation</td>
<td>Bay College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Kadlec</td>
<td>Beth Brandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sova</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Valley Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Cole</td>
<td>Janice Gilliland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sova</td>
<td>Henry Ford College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie Jacobs</td>
<td>Sean Newmiller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan College Access Network</td>
<td>Lake Michigan College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn Kearney</td>
<td>Amy Powney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan College Access Network</td>
<td>Grand Rapids Public Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy Johnson</td>
<td>Jamie Shepherd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity</td>
<td>Jackson College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica Luce</td>
<td>Bobbi Jo Stoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity</td>
<td>Gull Lake Community Schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The MCSS provides state-level support to Michigan’s 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty and staff in their emerging and ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research and policy. Funding for this work and other activities of the MCSS are provided through a generous grant from The Kresge Foundation and the support of Michigan’s 28 public community colleges. To learn more about our work, please visit our website at [https://www.mcca.org/about-the-mcss](https://www.mcca.org/about-the-mcss).