

California community colleges fall short on basics, study says

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Many students who are behind in their skills are not overcoming their deficiencies in the state's community colleges, according to a study by the Legislative Analyst's Office released Monday.

In particular, numerous students are not being assessed adequately or early enough in basic math, writing and reading skills, nor are they being guided in large enough numbers into remedial courses that will lift them up, the report states.

The report, "Back to Basics: Improving College Readiness of Community College Students," makes recommendations for improving the situation.

"These students need a lot of help," said the author, Paul Steenhausen, senior fiscal and policy analyst for the Legislative Analyst's Office. "They need more counseling. They need early assessment while they are still in high school."

The state has 109 community colleges. A major part of their mission is to provide basic skills education to students who are not ready for four-year colleges. Plenty of those students are arriving at community colleges, Steenhausen said. But relatively few are acquiring proficiency in basic skills during their time there.

According to the report, more than one-third of those assessed as remedial fail to enroll in courses that would help them. Of those who do enroll in basic skills classes for credit, about half do not return to college the next fall. The study found counseling services lacking, and teaching approaches in need of adjustment.

Assessments are a big problem, the report says, noting that community colleges use different tests and cut-off points for placing students in remedial courses.

"We, in effect, have 109 definitions of college readiness," said Nancy Schulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento.

"A lot of students don't even get assessed," Schulock said, adding that she supports the study's findings.

To address the assessment problem, the report recommends a more standardized approach. In particular, it suggests expanding an "Early Assessment Program" for high school students – already in use by state colleges – to include teenagers interested in attending a community college. And, to address variances across the system, it recommends using state testing standards and results employed at the high school level to help place freshmen in appropriate courses.

Carole Bogue-Feinour, vice chancellor for academic affairs for California Community Colleges, said improving basic skills education is a high priority.

"Much work is being done to address these issues," she said, noting colleges are in the midst of a "Basic Skills Initiative."

Similarly, Susie Williams, spokeswoman for the Los Rios Community College District, said efforts are under way to make sure more entering students are assessed and channeled into appropriate courses.

To read Monday's report, go to www.lao.ca.gov.