

POLICY BRIEF

# Diving Into the Deep End:

## How State College Administrators in Florida Describe the First Year of Developmental Education Reform

*Shouping Hu, Chenoa S. Woods, Keith Richard, David Tandberg, Toby Park, & Tamara Bertrand Jones*

In 2013 the state of Florida passed Senate Bill 1720 (SB 1720) which dramatically reshaped developmental education (DE) for the 28 Florida College System (FCS) institutions. The legislation categorized students who entered a traditional Florida public high school in 2003-2004 and graduated with a standard diploma in 2007 or later and active-duty military personnel as *exempt*, which allows these students to bypass DE placement tests and DE coursework, if they so choose. The legislation also required colleges to offer admission counseling to all incoming students and DE courses in different instructional modalities: modularized, compressed, contextualized, and co-requisite.

During the spring semester of 2015, The Center for Postsecondary Success (CPS) research team conducted a survey of high-level administrators across the FCS. The present study serves as the first quantitative point of contact with college leaders since the implementation of the SB 1720. The goal of the study is to examine how administrators assessed their implementation and initial effects of the legislation. The following research questions guide our analyses for this brief:

1. How do administrators describe the initial implementation of revised DE courses, academic advising, and student support services as they align to their institutional plan?
2. How do administrators assess the initial impacts of SB 1720 at their institution?
3. How do institutions group together based on their DE curriculum structure, academic advising practices, and student support services?

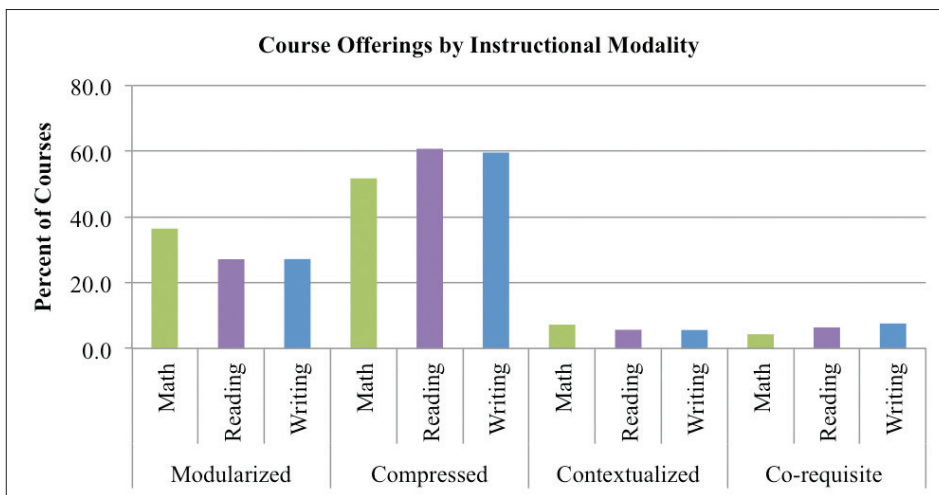
Our analyses revealed several overarching findings that reflect the significance of the legislation and the impacts it has had on colleges throughout the FCS. Our results highlight the

difficult challenges involved with implementing the reform and how institutions have addressed and overcome these challenges. Our key findings include:

1. *Overall, compressed and modularized courses were the most commonly used of the four instructional modalities.*
2. *Although DE has increasingly relied on technology, some respondents expressed concern regarding access, effectiveness, and student use.*
3. *Because colleges can no longer exclusively use Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT) scores as their DE placement tool, institutions have relied on other advising tools, techniques, and predictive models to assist the advising process.*
4. *Institutions show somewhat different patterns in developmental education curriculum structure, academic advising, and student support services, which lead to distinct groups in institutional responses and practices in developmental education implementation.*
5. *Despite challenges and tempered agreement that implementing their institutional plan resulted in positive outcomes, institutions reported many positive changes occurring across their institutions.*

### **COMPRESSED AND MODULARIZED AS MORE COMMONLY USED INSTRUCTIONAL MODALITIES**

Compressed instruction tends to be the most common modality across institutions, for math, reading and writing courses. On average, 52% of math, 61% of reading, and 60% of writing courses are offered as compressed



**Figure 1.** Developmental course offerings for Math, Reading, and Writing by instructional modality.

(Figure 1). Modularized courses are also a relatively common modality and are at least one-quarter of the courses offered in each subject area (37% math, 27% reading, and 27% writing). Contextualized and co-requisite courses are much less common. On average, less than 10% of math, reading, and writing courses are offered as contextualized or offered as co-requisite. However, our analyses later revealed that a certain group of institutions (which we refer to as Cluster 2) offered contextualized and co-requisite courses at the highest rates.

### USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN DE INCREASED WITH EMERGING CONCERNS

Few colleges agreed or strongly agreed that technology was an effective advising tool (15%) or that their early alert system was effective (25%), despite 50% of colleges utilizing an early alert system. Forty percent of colleges agreed to some extent that advisors have sensed concern among students related to the increased reliance on technology in DE.

Other uses of technology are also concerning. Whereas 45% of institutions agreed or strongly agreed that they were successful in offering more online courses, far fewer responded that their massive open online courses (MOOCs; 12%) or online and distance learning DE courses (20%) were effective (Table 1). Although the majority of institutions agreed or strongly agreed that students had sufficient access to computers and labs (80%) and that there was ample technology support (55%), only 45% responded similarly that the labs had sufficient equipment and space. Further, 45% of institutions disagreed to some extent that students had sufficient computer and/or software knowledge to complete courses.

There were also mixed results regarding support services that required computers and/or internet access. The quality of computer lab services was high ( $m=4.2$ ), but the quality of online tutoring was slightly lower ( $m=3.8$ , on a scale where 3 is neutral). Use of technology-based support services also varied; only 5% of students used computer lab services, and even fewer (3%) used online tutoring services. Our analyses later also indicated that students

in institutions in Cluster 2 used online tutoring services at the highest rates.

### RAMPED-UP ADVISING STRATEGIES

The majority of institutions (70%) agreed or strongly agreed to their use of transcripts, checklists, individual education plans, and degree maps during advising. Fewer use intrusive advising techniques (35%), early warning systems (50%), or consider non-cognitive factors such as learning styles or outside commitments (65%) during advising. Our later cluster analyses, however, indicated that institutions in Cluster 2 used degree maps and advising checklists at the lowest rates.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they used predictive models, considering multiple factors (e.g. high school grades and assessment scores) when advising. Eleven institutions indicated that they used predictive models and provided factors for their models. We analyzed these open-ended answers and found 10 categories of factors:

- high school background: grades; grade point average, transcripts, courses, grades in specific courses, and student self-reported success (100%)
- assessment scores (PERT, SAT, ACT, FCAT, etc.; 64%)
- dual enrollment participation and prior college credit (18%)
- high school class rank (9%)
- career interests or inventories (18%)
- an algorithm (9%)
- family and work commitments (9%)
- time lapsed since previous education or since last specific course (18%)
- work and/or military experience (9%)
- major and/or meta-major (9%)

**Table 1.** Summary Statistics of Institutions' Technology Allocation

	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree	% Somewhat Disagree	% Neutral	% Somewhat Agree	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Successful in offering more online courses	10	15	0	30	45
Online and distance learning DE curriculum effective	20	10	45	5	20
MOOCs effective <sup>1</sup>	18	0	71	0	12
Sufficient access to computers/labs to complete courses	5	5	0	10	80
Sufficient computer/software knowledge to complete courses	15	30	10	15	30
Computer labs have sufficient equipment and space to sustain a higher volume of students	10	15	10	20	45
Technology support is sufficient to handle increase of technology used in DE	10	10	15	10	55

Note. n=20; <sup>1</sup> n=17.

## CHANGES IN PRACTICES OCCURRED ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Implementing the DE reform posed challenges to colleges, and many disagreed to some extent that the legislation resulted in positive student or institutional outcomes. For example, 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had improved student performance in gateway courses, and 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their college has increased student success since implementing their plan. Relatedly, merely 26% agreed or strongly agreed that they had streamlined student progress to credit-bearing courses. Further, despite high levels of advisor training and effectiveness, few institutions agreed or strongly agreed that advisors had ample time to meet with students (15%), could meet students' needs (11%), or had sufficient staff to handle the large advising caseloads (5%).

Nevertheless, institutions noted that the implementation and planning processes have led to several positive effects. For example, many respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their college had better collaboration across different departments (68%); increased innovation (63%); developed greater efficiencies (47%); decreased student time in DE courses (47%); and improved recommendations for students (47%; Figure 2).

Institutions also reported positive effects regarding their advising practices. Many agreed or strongly agreed that they improved advising and student progress monitoring

(42%); that their advising practices were effective for guiding students on their exemption status (70%) and regarding DE (70%); academic units coordinated with advising staff (60%); and they were able to increase the types of advising offered (53%). Similarly, the majority of institutions agreed or strongly agreed that advisors were trained to address DE issues (85%) and were informed of the available student support services (90%).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the initial implementation of Senate Bill 1720 and processes of the institutions throughout the state of Florida as they address the statute. Because many colleges had implemented programs, courses, and other services to assist their developmental students previous to the Senate Bill, we cannot quantitatively determine which outcomes are directly related to the legislation. Nevertheless, this survey is the first exploration of SB 1720 following its initial implementation and the results revealed that:

- Overall, modularized and compressed courses were the most commonly used of the four instructional modalities.
- Although DE has increasingly relied on technology, some respondents expressed concern regarding access, effectiveness, and student use.
- Because colleges can no longer exclusively use Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT) scores as their DE placement tool, institutions have relied on other advising tools,

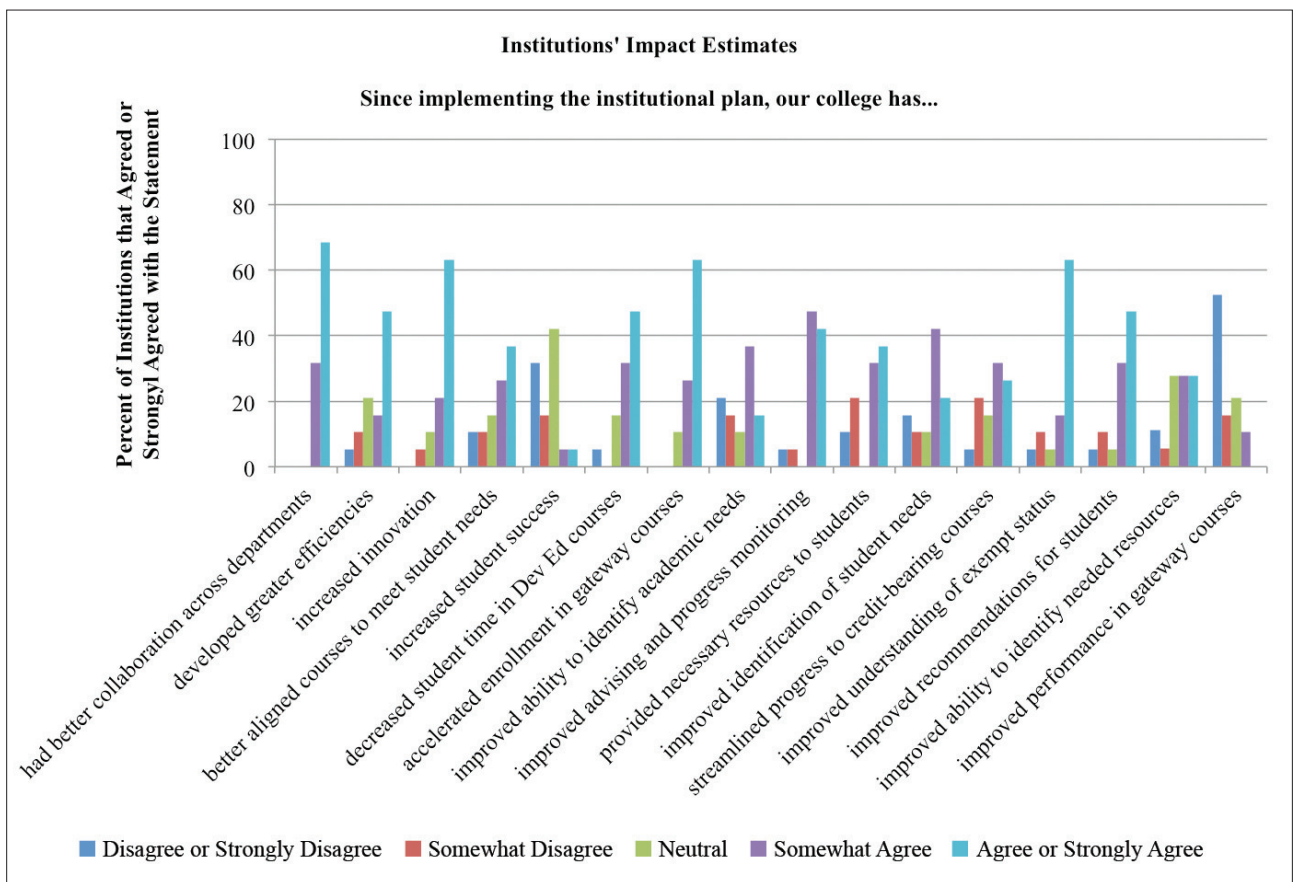


Figure 2. Institutions' impact estimates of implementing DE reform.

techniques, and predictive models to assist the advising process.

- Institutions show somewhat different patterns in developmental education curriculum structure, academic advising, and student support services, which lead to distinct groups in institutional responses and practices in developmental education implementation.
- Despite challenges and tempered agreement that implementing their institutional plan resulted in positive outcomes, institutions reported many positive changes occurring across their institutions.

These results appear to indicate that institutions are attempting to respond to the legislation and are doing so in ways they believe will best serve students. Our analyses also reveal distinct patterns regarding the responses of the institutions, with some institutions preferring different modes of delivery and approaches to student advising, for example. We acknowledge the quick timeline of moving from the passing of SB 1720 through the planning into the implementation stages. Many of these processes, particularly those related to identifying student needs and

outcomes, may become more evident after longitudinal student outcome data become available. Therefore, we urge institutions to use their available data to assess which courses and instructional modalities lead to the greatest success rates; which students are progressing through their DE sequence to gateway courses; which gateway courses have highest completion rates; how and which students use the support services available; and how advising and student support services affect students' success. Similarly, the CPS will continue to assess SB 1720 and address these issues with additional data sources in attempts to understand the full ramifications of a legislation that augmented DE practices for thousands of students across the state of Florida.