

Stakeholder Summary

Study examines developmental communication courses in college sector

Communication is a core employability skill and many colleges have instituted developmental communication courses to help strengthen these skills in students who are admitted to college but do not have the expected 'college-level English' proficiency. A new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario both examines the effectiveness of these courses and suggests avenues for improved multi-institutional research in Ontario's college sector.

Project description

The Effects of Developmental Communication Instruction on Language Skills and Persistence at Four Ontario Colleges measured student performance on a standardized communication test (WritePlacer) both before beginning and after completing the developmental communication course. It also investigated persistence through the first academic year for students who took the course. Of 1,316 students who entered college in fall 2012 and had been sorted into developmental English by their institution, 63% took the WritePlacer test before and after the course. The students also completed a demographic questionnaire and granted researchers access to their academic records at the college.

Findings

The study found that 55% of the students improved their performance on the post-course WritePlacer test although the authors acknowledge that other factors, such as course work from other classes, may have impacted student performance.

Among other findings, students who entered college directly from high school were more likely to have higher pre-course test scores. Those with higher scores were more likely to pass the developmental communication course, and they as well as non-first-generation students were more likely to outperform their peers on the post-course test.

Students who passed the communication course were also more likely to continue their studies, as were students who came directly from high school and those who had higher fall semester GPAs.

Recommendations

The authors suggest that a common post-admission course placement test for the province's colleges would reduce costs and better reflect the language and structure of the Ontario college sector. They also note the challenges of conducting multi-institutional research in the sector, including divergent ethics review processes, the decentralization of data within colleges and differences in data infrastructure at each institution. The latter issues complicate sharing student data across institutions and could be addressed, say the authors, through a common data access and retrieval process.

They also note a data divide between secondary and postsecondary sectors and cite the College Mathematics Project and the College Student Achievement Project as worthy models in improving data transfer as well as the quality of secondary and postsecondary research. “This need will only become more pressing as the percentage of secondary students who enrol in postsecondary education increases each year.”

Authors of *The Effects of Developmental Communication Instruction on Language Skills and Persistence at Four Ontario Colleges* are Scott Bunyan, Mohawk College and HEQCO researchers Linda Jonker and Nicholas Dion.