Underprepared Students in Kentucky:
A First Look at the 2001 Mandatory Placement Policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education
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In fall 2001, Kentucky instituted a placement policy mandating that all students entering undergraduate programs at public institutions who receive a score of 17 or below on ACT subject exams in math, English or reading be placed in remedial coursework or receive supplemental help in those subjects. This study examines the incoming class from fall 2002 and follows them through their first two years of postsecondary study, examining their remedial needs, their remedial course-taking, and their retention to the second year.

The data used in this report are administrative data submitted as student-unit records by the public postsecondary institutions to the Council's Comprehensive Database during the 2002-03 and 2003-04 academic years. The report is based on descriptive statistics about the 26,646 students who entered Kentucky's public two and four-year institutions in the fall of 2002 as full or part-time students seeking degrees or other credentials, and for whom CPE received the ACT, SAT or on-campus placement exam scores needed to classify their preparation level.

How underprepared for postsecondary study was Kentucky's college entry cohort of 2002?

This question helps gauge the degree of remedial services that postsecondary institutions need to provide for their students. The number of entering students needing remediation is also seen as a measure of the quality of Kentucky's P-12 education system, although this is not quite true. An incoming college class includes students who graduated from high schools in other states, earned GEDs, or were adult students who graduated from Kentucky high schools before recent educational reforms. To help answer this important policy question, Figure A above presents the preparation levels of the entire

Figure A. Students Entering College Underprepared in Fall 2002 (Scoring 17 and below in ACT subject exams)

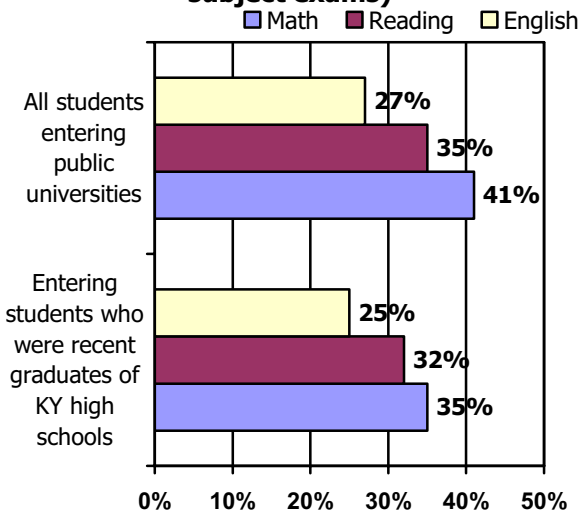
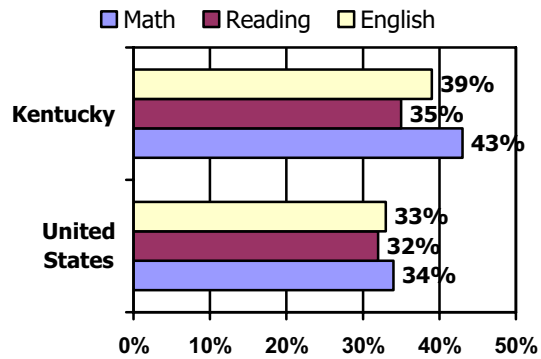


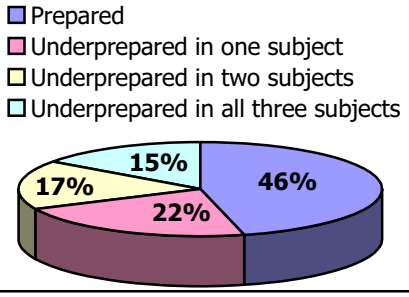
Figure B. High School ACT Takers Scoring 17 and Below on ACT Subject Exams in 2002



fall 2002 entry cohort and of the subset who graduated from Kentucky high schools in 2001 or 2002. These recent high school graduates make up 63 percent of the total entry cohort. National data is also presented for comparison in Figure B.

Overall, a slim majority of 54 percent of students who entered certificate and degree programs at Kentucky's public institutions of higher education in fall 2002 were under-prepared for college-level study in at least one subject. Many of these under-prepared students were underprepared in more than one subject as can be seen below.

Figure C. Depth of Remedial Needs, Entire Public College Entry Cohort 2002



There was wide variation in preparation level among the institutions due to their differing missions and student selectivity, ranging from 15 percent at UK to 85 percent at KSU. Demographically, non-traditional students and students from some racial-ethnic minority groups were much less well prepared for college-level study than their peers (see table 4 in the full report for details).

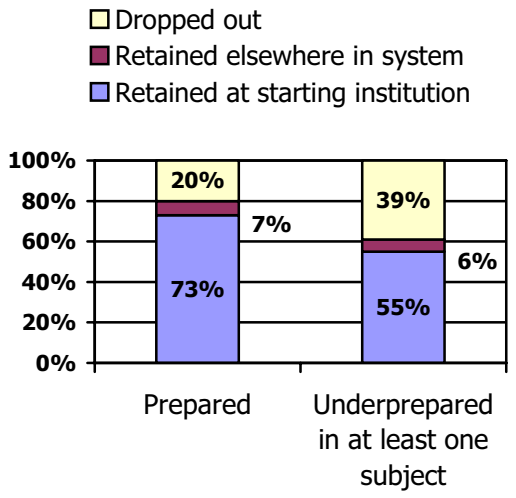
How underprepared were recent graduates of Kentucky high schools?

Recent graduates of Kentucky high schools were slightly better prepared for college than was the entire entry cohort in 2002. Overall, slightly less than half (48 percent) were underprepared in at least one subject, and 29 percent were underprepared in two or three subjects, compared to 32 percent in the college entry cohort as whole. Looking at Figure B, college entrants who were recent graduates of Kentucky high schools compared favorably to ACT takers nationally, although ACT, Inc. counsels against making this kind of comparison given the wide demographic differences between states.

Were underprepared students retained?

Students who came to college underprepared were less likely to return for their second year. Systemwide, nearly three-quarters of prepared students came back for a second year of study at the institution where they started, compared to slightly over half of those who were underprepared in at least one subject (Figure D). Also, underprepared students were twice as likely to drop out of college altogether as were those who were prepared: 39 percent compared to 20 percent.

Figure D. Student Retention by Level of Preparation

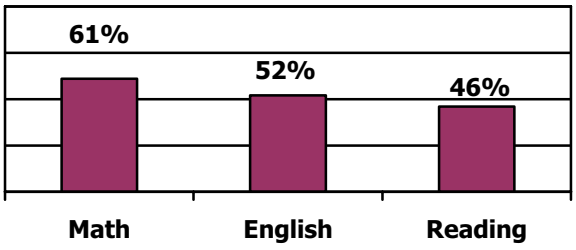


Students who were underprepared in all three subjects were even less likely to be retained – only 50 percent returned for a second year of study.

Did underprepared students take remedial courses?

Systemwide, only a slim majority of underprepared students were remediated in a given subject (Figure E). The leaders in remediation were Morehead State University, Kentucky State University and Eastern Kentucky University, who each remediated between 82 – 95 percent of their underprepared students. Other schools had lower remediation rates, the lowest remediating only 40 percent of their retained, underprepared students in a given subject by the end of their second year. These numbers do not include students who received tutoring and

Figure E. Remediation of Underprepared Students by Subject
(Includes supplemented college-level courses)



other forms of academic support not tracked in remedial course data. Supplemented college-level courses that meet the requirements of the Mandatory Placement Policy are included where that data was available.

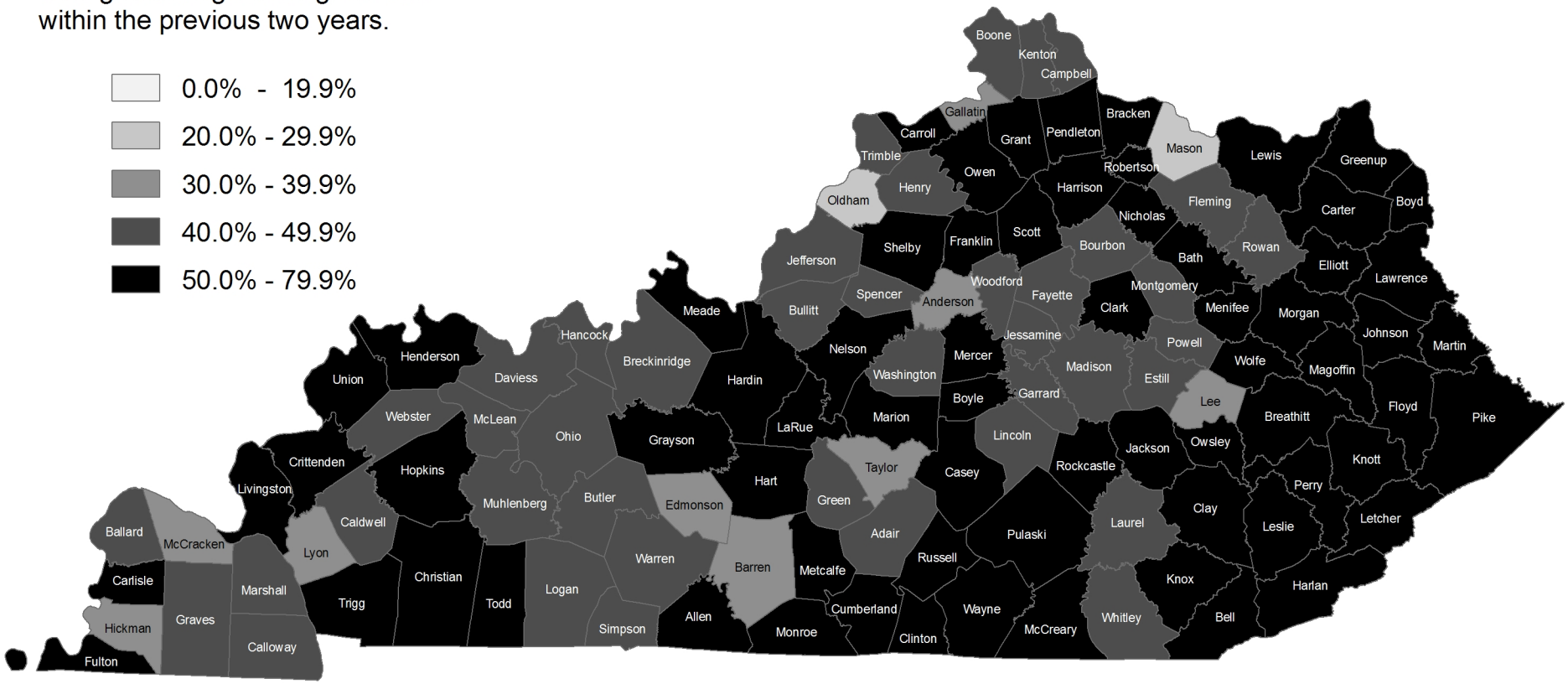
While this remediation picture looks poor, it is important to note that these numbers undercount the actual remediation rates because this report does not include on-campus placement exam data from the four-year institutions. Students who enter with low ACT or SAT scores have an opportunity to place out of remediation by passing on-campus placement exams, which would reclassify them as "prepared." Institutions were not required to collect and submit the results of these exams in the 2002 reporting year. Consequently, this analysis does not reflect the reclassification of students who placed out of remediation by taking on-campus placement exams. Also, some schools did not report supplemented college-level courses in 2002, so these remedial efforts are not included here.

Despite the limitations of this data, Council staff believes it is necessary to highlight these remediation rates because they measure the crux of the Council's mandatory placement policy: are underprepared students receiving the help they need to succeed? The Council is committed to pursing excellence in the provision of services to academically at-risk students, and accountability is essential to this endeavor.

This report examines the college preparation level and remediation of the postsecondary entering class of fall 2002. Some institutions have made substantial changes in their remediation polices since the academic years covered in this report. Also, CPE has been working to improve its data collection concerning remediation and academic supplementation. The council will continue to evaluate these remedial polices and programs, and hopes to look in more depth at the outcomes of underprepared students in the future.

Figure 1: Percent of Recent HS Graduates Entering College Underprepared in One or More Subjects, 2002

Students scoring less than 18 on one or more of the ACT exams in mathematics, English, and reading as a percentage of all students taking such exams and entering public postsecondary institutions in the Fall of 2002 after graduating from high school within the previous two years.



Source: Council on Postsecondary Education Comprehensive Database