

AFT Presentation to the Board of Trustees, August 1, 2013, Texas Success Initiatives

Good evening. I am John Burghduff representing the American Federation of Teachers. Tonight I would like to address state mandated changes in our methodology for placing students into appropriate classes and the potential impact on student success.

When I began my community college teaching career in the 80s, we would offer advice but we would largely permit students to enroll in whichever classes they wanted. It was their money, we reasoned, they were adults and they could accept the consequences of a bad choice. However, research and experience have clearly shown that mandatory placement into appropriate classes has a profound impact on the likelihood of success. Therefore, for many years Lone Star College has insisted that students be able to demonstrate preparedness through completion of prerequisite courses or placement by testing.

In the coming school year, the process by which we do this will change drastically. A new statewide placement test for reading, writing and math promises more detailed diagnostics. Since the test is new, however, cut scores are mostly arbitrary rather than based on student data. We also will no longer be allowed to vary from state mandated cut scores. The Lone Star English faculty found on our old test that students needed to place higher than state recommended scores to be ready for Composition I and, consequently, for other writing intensive courses like History and Government.

Performance in high school will be given greater consideration in placement as well. For example, passing the end of course exam for Algebra II will place a student directly into College Algebra even though the state curriculum for Algebra II is less extensive than our developmental math curriculum.

With issues like I have outlined so far, there is some question about whether students placed into our college level courses will be as prepared as we have been used to. Other measures we are expected to consider, like the student's level of motivation, seem dangerously close to the ways of the past when we let students take classes just because they really wanted to.

From the national level to the local level, testing and its impact on students is a major point of action for the AFT. However, the changes that are coming in placement testing cannot be altered at this point. The purpose of tonight's talk is simply to heighten awareness. We cannot lower our expectations for our college level classes; doing so would handicap our students in their future endeavors. We hope that, when the impact of these changes is fully felt this spring, we will see students better prepared for these classes. However, there is ample reason to be concerned that the opposite may occur instead. The AFT hopes that all of us will be aware that pass rates and other data are likely to be volatile this year and, perhaps, for several years. If so, we must not panic and we must not blame each other. New programs to help students are already in place and we will advocate vigorously for improvements in the placement system when needed. Lone Star faculty and staff will do our best to help our students do their best.