

Examining the English Language Arts Course Placement System at the College of the Marshall Islands

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Examining the English Language Arts Course Placement System at the College of the Marshall Islands

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February 2026

The College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) places many students into developmental English language arts (ELA) courses, which raises concerns about these students' likely academic success and persistence to graduation compared with their peers in credit-bearing courses. In an effort to increase the percentage of students who place into and pass credit-bearing ELA courses and persist to a second year of college at CMI, CMI modified its course placement process before the 2021/22 school year. Students now take a revised ELA course placement test that includes multiple-choice and writing components. Additionally, CMI also considers cumulative high school grade point average (GPA) when placing students into developmental courses or credit-bearing courses and into regular or intensive pathways through these courses.

The goals of this study were to evaluate the relationship between the revised ELA course placement process and student outcomes and examine how well CMI's revised ELA course placement process measures ELA course performance. The study examined ELA course placement, course passing, and college persistence rates among students enrolling at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024, after CMI implemented these changes. The study also evaluated the relationship between CMI's revised placement process and performance in credit-bearing ELA courses.

The study found that 11 percent of students who enrolled at CMI between spring 2022 and spring 2024 initially placed into credit-bearing ELA courses. CMI's prior placement system had a higher credit-bearing placement rate of 22 percent. Students placed into intensive pathways of credit-bearing courses and higher-level developmental courses in their first year at CMI had the highest passing rates for credit-bearing courses. Additionally, regardless of course level, students placed into intensive pathways had the highest rates of college persistence.

The study also found that the multiple-choice component of CMI's revised ELA course placement test effectively measured ELA performance, particularly for lower-performing students. The multiple-choice component and high school GPA were similarly able to predict passing credit-bearing ELA courses, while the writing component did not predict any outcomes. Because of these findings, CMI might consider using only high school GPA to place students or weighting high school GPA more heavily and removing the writing component to ensure appropriate and logistically efficient course placement.

Why this study?

The College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) is an accredited community college in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) offering high school equivalency, community extension, certificate programs, associate degrees in various content areas, and a bachelor's degree in elementary education. The English language arts (ELA) faculty at CMI are concerned about the low rates of placement into credit-bearing ELA courses among first-year students (see box 1 for definitions of key terms used in this report). A prior Regional Educational Laboratory

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, supporting analyses, and supplemental analyses, see the appendices for the report on the [Institute of Education Sciences website](#).

(REL) Pacific study found that during 2015-17, CMI placed only 22 percent of first-year students who graduated from an RMI public high school into credit-bearing ELA courses (Shannon et al., 2021). This is potentially worrisome, because prior research outside of RMI found that students in developmental courses generally take longer to graduate, are at greater risk of dropping out, and have lower graduation rates than their peers (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). In contrast, a recent study found that among students with similar prior academic performance across multiple measures, those placed into credit-bearing courses generally earned more college credits than those placed into developmental courses (Kopko et al., 2023). These findings underscore the importance of addressing the low rate of placement in credit-bearing courses among CMI students.

Developmental courses are intended to prepare students for credit-bearing courses. To improve outcomes for ELA students at CMI, faculty modified the ELA course placement process and placement test before the start of the 2021/22 school year. First, CMI constructed a placement system that uses multiple measures—ELA course placement test results and cumulative high school grade point average (GPA)—to determine students' placement into each level of credit-bearing or developmental ELA courses. Second, ELA faculty revised the ELA course placement test to better align with the content of the first-year ELA courses and introduced a new statistical scoring approach to more precisely measure performance. Previously, course placement was based solely on performance on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test, which was scored by counting the number of correct items without accounting for differences in item difficulty. The revised scoring approach considers item difficulty and generates percentiles of student performance on the multiple-choice component. These percentiles, along with students' scores on the writing component of the placement test and their high school GPA, determine course placement decisions.

CMI dropped its lowest level of developmental ELA courses (Level 1) before the start of the 2021/22 school year and now offers first-year students two levels of developmental ELA courses (Levels 2 and 3) and one level of credit-bearing ELA courses (Level 4). As part of its revised placement system, CMI created an intensive pathway within each level to enable students who perform among the top 50 percent of students (based on a weighted combination of placement test results and cumulative high school GPA) to complete ELA courses more quickly. In levels 2 and 3, students in intensive pathways complete four ELA courses during one semester, while students in regular pathways complete two ELA courses during one semester and two during a second semester. In level 4, students in the intensive pathway complete two courses in one semester, while students in the regular pathway complete one course each semester. Finally, CMI is working with the RMI Public School System (RMI-PSS) to enhance content alignment between high school and college courses, easing student transitions between secondary and postsecondary coursework. (For additional research and background information underpinning the systemic changes made by CMI, see appendix A.)

CMI's revised ELA course placement process uses a weighted combination of the ELA course placement test results (75 percent) and cumulative high school GPA (25 percent) to place students into course levels. Students in the lowest third of the score range are placed into Level 2 courses, those in the middle third of the score range are placed into Level 3 courses, and those in the highest third of the score range are placed into Level 4 courses (figure 1). Within each placement level, the lower-performing 50 percent of students are considered for placement in a regular pathway, and the higher-performing 50 percent are considered for placement in an intensive pathway. ELA faculty review these initial course placements and modify them as needed to determine the final course level and pathway for each student. (For additional information about the ELA course placement process, see appendix A.)

Box 1. Key terms

Course types

Credit-bearing courses. College courses that allow students to earn credits that can be applied toward a degree or certificate. At the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), the initial credit-bearing English language arts (ELA) courses students can place into are designated as Level 4.

Developmental courses. Noncredit-bearing or remedial college courses that do not allow students to earn credits that can be applied toward a degree or certificate but that prepare students for credit-bearing courses. At CMI, the initial developmental ELA courses students can place into are designated as Level 2 or Level 3.

Initial course placement levels

Level 1. Before the 2021/22 school year, the lowest level of ELA courses offered to first-year students at CMI. CMI dropped Level 1 courses as part of its revised ELA course placement process.

Level 2. Since the start of the 2021/22 school year, the lowest level of ELA courses offered to first-year students at CMI and the first level of developmental ELA courses. Courses offered at this level are English 086 (Intermediate Listening and Speaking) and English 087 (Intermediate Reading and Writing). Students who place into Level 2 ELA courses must pass both of these courses before they can enroll in a Level 3 ELA course.

Level 3. The middle level of ELA courses offered to first-year students at CMI and the last level of developmental ELA courses. Courses offered at this level are English 096 (Introduction to Academic Listening and Speaking) and English 097 (Introduction to Academic Reading and Writing). Students who place into Level 3 ELA courses must pass both of these courses before they can enroll in a Level 4 ELA course.

Level 4. The highest level of ELA courses offered to first-year students at CMI; these are credit-bearing courses. Courses offered at this level are English 105 (Fundamentals of Speech) and English 111 (English Composition I). Students must complete both credit-bearing ELA courses to graduate. Students can take the courses in any order or simultaneously. Students whose major requires additional ELA courses must complete both of these Level 4 courses before they can enroll in another ELA course.

Pathways for English language arts courses

Intensive pathways. The approximately higher-performing 50 percent of first-year CMI students (based on weighted scores representing ELA course placement test performance and cumulative high school GPA) at each ELA course level are eligible to enroll in the intensive pathway. Students in this pathway take both courses at their placement level during the first half of the semester and, for those placed into Levels 2 or 3, courses at the next placement level during the second half of the semester. The courses cover the same content as the regular pathway courses but are compressed into a shorter period to accelerate students' completion of developmental coursework.

Regular pathways. The approximately lower-performing 50 percent of first-year CMI students (based on weighted scores representing ELA course placement test performance and cumulative high school GPA) at each ELA course level who do not place into an intensive pathway enroll in the regular pathway. Students in this pathway take one set of ELA courses (Level 2, 3, or 4) during one semester and the next set of higher-level courses during another semester or semesters.

Initial course placement process

Cumulative high school GPA. The average number of grade points a student earns across all graded high school courses attempted, computed by dividing the total number of grade points received by the total number of credit hours.

ELA course placement test. The test all students from the RMI enrolling at CMI for the first time must take as part of the placement process for initial ELA courses. This test includes a multiple-choice component and a writing component.

ELA course placement test precision. A threshold of 16 was used to represent how accurate the ELA course placement test is for each student score.

Analytic terms and variables

ELA domains. The three ELA domains that the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test intends to measure: vocabulary, language use, and sentence meaning.

ELA domain performance. Students' performance on the three ELA domains covered by the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test. ELA domain performance is independent of (not correlated with) their ELA performance overall.

ELA performance overall and ELA performance. A statistical estimate of a student's performance on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test generated by item response theory analyses. These analyses yielded *z*-scores that were continuous and that followed a standard normal distribution, centered at 0 and generally ranging from -4 to 4. These values represent the students' original ELA performance test scores, which are later transformed by CMI into the ELA performance percentiles and the 1-4 course placement levels (see appendix A). The two terms are used interchangeably, with *ELA performance overall* used primarily when needed to distinguish the measure from *ELA domain performance*.

ELA performance percentiles. A statistical estimate of a student's performance on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test generated by transforming the ELA performance *z*-scores using a normal distribution. Values ranged from 0 to 100. For example, a student with a percentile rank of 80 performed better than 80 percent of students. Percentile ranks are calculated for students' multiple-choice component scores and are used to place students with similar percentile ranks into one of three groups. These groups serve as students' multiple-choice component placement scores. The ELA performance percentiles are used as part of CMI's ELA course placement process.

ELA writing component scores. Student scores, ranging from 1 to 4, assessed by ELA faculty, on the writing component of the ELA course placement test.

Type of high school attended. Whether a non-Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) high school, RMI community high school, RMI high school equivalence, RMI private high school, or RMI public high school.

Outcome measures

College persistence. A measure of whether first-year students continued into a second year at CMI. CMI's persistence definitions were used to determine these values. For students who enrolled at CMI for the first time in the fall or spring, this variable indicated whether they continued at CMI the following fall or spring, respectively. For students who enrolled at CMI for the first time in the summer, this variable indicated whether they continued at CMI in the fall of the following year, as CMI does not include summer in persistence calculations. Students are generally not able to obtain credentials or degrees without persisting to a second year.

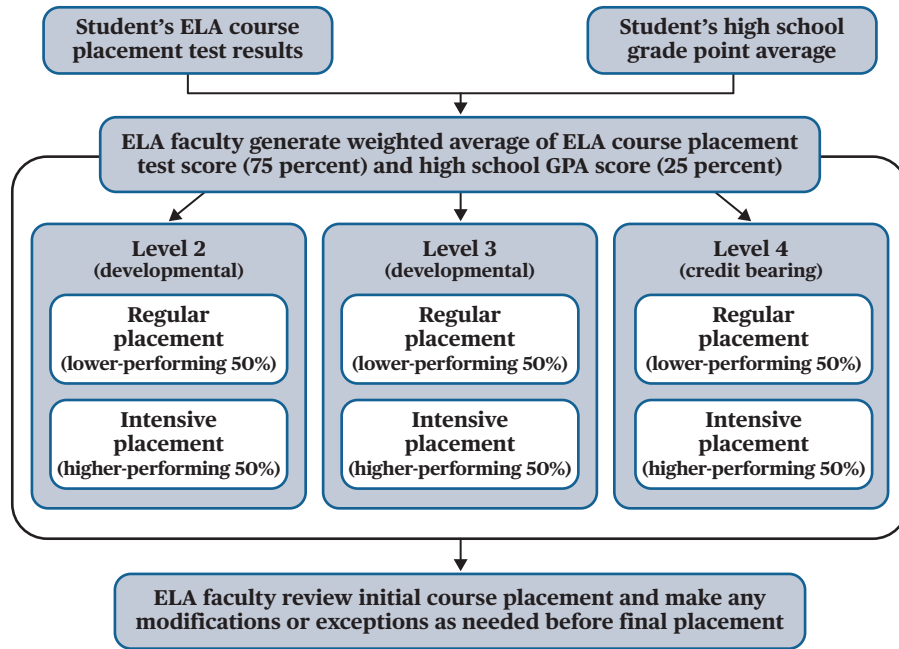
Credit-bearing ELA course passing. Measures of whether students passed the two Level 4 ELA courses (English 105 and English 111).

CMI requested this study to obtain descriptive information on ELA course placement procedures and students' early college outcomes. Specifically, CMI sought to understand whether and how the credit-bearing placement and college persistence rates found in a previous REL Pacific study have changed since CMI implemented systemic revisions to the ELA course placement process (Shannon et al., 2021). Understanding course passing and college persistence rates for students placed into different course levels and into intensive or regular pathways in their first year at CMI can inform CMI's decisions about the structure of the developmental ELA courses, their alignment with credit-bearing ELA courses, and the need for additional support for students in different levels or pathways. CMI also wanted to understand how well its ELA course placement process was functioning, including its placement test and the weight assigned to cumulative high school GPA in the placement decision. The study findings may inform potential modifications to the placement test, such as streamlining the test and improving its alignment with CMI's credit-bearing ELA courses. The study findings will also support CMI's decision-making about potential revisions to its placement measure weights, such as removing the writing component and increasing the weights for high school GPA. (For additional background information, see appendix A.)

Research questions

The study served two main purposes. First, it examined ELA course placement, course passing, and college persistence rates at CMI to provide insight into the functioning of CMI's revised placement process. Second,

Figure 1. The English language arts (ELA) course placement process at the College of Marshall Islands



Note: This figure depicts an abbreviated version of the course placement process. Within each placement level, the lower-performing 50 percent of students are considered for placement in a regular pathway, and the higher-performing 50 percent of students are considered for placement in an intensive pathway. See appendix A for additional details.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

the study evaluated how well the multiple-choice component of CMI's revised ELA course placement test measured ELA performance among recent cohorts of students and how well the test components and cumulative high school GPA predicted students' probability of passing credit-bearing ELA courses. Specifically, the study addressed five research questions:

1. Among students enrolling at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024, what percentage placed into each level (Levels 2 or 3) and pathway (regular or intensive) of the developmental ELA courses? What percentage placed into each pathway (regular or intensive) of the credit-bearing ELA courses (Level 4)?
2. Among students enrolling at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024, what percentage of those initially placed into each pathway (regular or intensive) of each level (Levels 2 and 3) of the developmental ELA courses passed the credit-bearing courses on their first attempt? What percentage initially placed into each pathway (regular or intensive) of the credit-bearing courses (Level 4) passed the courses on their first attempt?
3. Among students enrolling at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024, what percentage of those initially placed into each pathway (regular or intensive) of each level (Levels 2 and 3) of the developmental ELA courses persisted to a second year of college at CMI? What percentage initially placed into each pathway (regular or intensive) of the credit-bearing courses (Level 4) persisted to a second year of college at CMI?
4. To what extent do test items on the multiple-choice component of the CMI ELA course placement test measure ELA performance overall and by specific domain (vocabulary, language use, and sentence meaning), as intended?
5. To what extent do the CMI ELA course placement test (multiple-choice and writing components), cumulative high school GPA, and type of high school attended predict students' probability of passing the credit-bearing ELA courses?

The study's data sources, sample, and methods are described briefly in box 2 and in greater detail in appendix B.

Box 2. Data sources, study sample, methods, and limitations

Data sources. The College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) provided the data for this study. Data included English language arts (ELA) course placement test scores; cumulative high school grade point averages (GPA); the year and term students entered CMI; high school type (see box 1); and outcome variables, including indicators of passing or not passing credit-bearing ELA courses (English 105 and English 111) and college persistence. (Appendix B provides a more detailed description of the data.)

Study samples. There were two main analytic samples and several subsamples:

- **ELA course placement test takers.** All students who took the CMI ELA course placement test between spring 2022 and spring 2024 ($N = 1,098$). This sample was used to address research question 4 about the test's measurement of ELA performance.
- **ELA course placement test takers who enrolled at CMI.** A subset of the total ELA course placement test takers who enrolled at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 ($n = 1,019$). This sample was used to address research questions 1-3 about students' course enrollment, passing rates, and college persistence.
- **Subsamples of students who enrolled in credit-bearing courses (English 105 and English 111).** A subset of the ELA course placement test takers who enrolled at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 and who initially or after taking developmental courses enrolled in the English 105 credit-bearing course ($n = 381$) and the English 111 credit-bearing course ($n = 383$) and had complete outcome data. This subsample was used to address research question 5 about the extent to which multiple measures predict students' probability of passing the credit-bearing ELA courses.

Methodology. For descriptive research questions 1-3, frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the percentage of students who placed into the different ELA course levels and pathways, the percentage who passed the credit-bearing courses, and the percentage who persisted to a second year of college at CMI. Group differences were evaluated for statistical and substantial differences. Differences were considered statistically significant when the reported p -value was less than .05 using chi-square tests. Differences were considered substantial when observed differences in outcome variables were 10 percentage points or larger in magnitude, which indicates a potentially large difference between outcomes for students in each course pathway. Substantially different results are reported regardless of statistical significance.

For research question 4, bifactor item response theory analysis—which examines how individuals answer items on a test—was conducted to examine the properties of the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test. First, the extent to which the items measured students' ELA performance overall and by the domains of the ELA course placement test (vocabulary, language use, and sentence meaning) was examined by looking at the test item loadings (how well each test item measured students' ELA performance overall and by domain). Values of 0.6 or higher indicate a strong contribution to the measurement of student ELA performance overall, and values of 0.3 or higher indicate a strong contribution to the measurement of student domain performance (see Jung et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Then, the extent to which the multiple-choice component of the placement test precisely measures different levels of students' ELA performance overall was examined by looking at the test's measurement precision across levels of student ELA performance. Higher values indicate less uncertainty around the estimates and better precision. A threshold of 16 was used to represent high measurement precision (the point at which the test has high certainty) around estimates of ELA performance.

For research question 5, logistic regression analyses were conducted. The regression models accounted for cohort membership (the term in which a student enrolled at CMI for the first time) and included the ELA course placement test score (both the multiple-choice and writing components), cumulative high school GPA, and type of high school attended as predictors of the probability of passing the credit-bearing courses. Estimated marginal probabilities were also calculated, which indicate the predicted probability of passing the credit-bearing courses for specified levels of each predictor, while averaging over the levels of the other predictors. The findings section discusses the probabilities for any predictor that was statistically significant in the logistic regression models. (For additional details on the study's methodology, see appendix B.)

Limitations. The study was limited to students taking the ELA course placement test and enrolling at CMI between spring 2022 and spring 2024, and the findings might not generalize to other contexts or cohorts. These students might have experienced disruptions in their high school education during the Covid-19 pandemic that affected their college performance and how well their cumulative high school GPA predicted early college outcomes. Accounting for time and contextual factors

(such as social, political, economic, and geographic factors) that could have influenced student outcomes was beyond the scope of the study.

The study described course placement, course passing rates, and college persistence of students placed into different ELA course levels and pathways (regular or intensive). However, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that placement in higher course levels or intensive pathways causes higher passing or persistence rates. Students placed into higher course levels and intensive pathways had the highest initial ELA proficiency rates, which could have contributed to their outcomes.

Findings

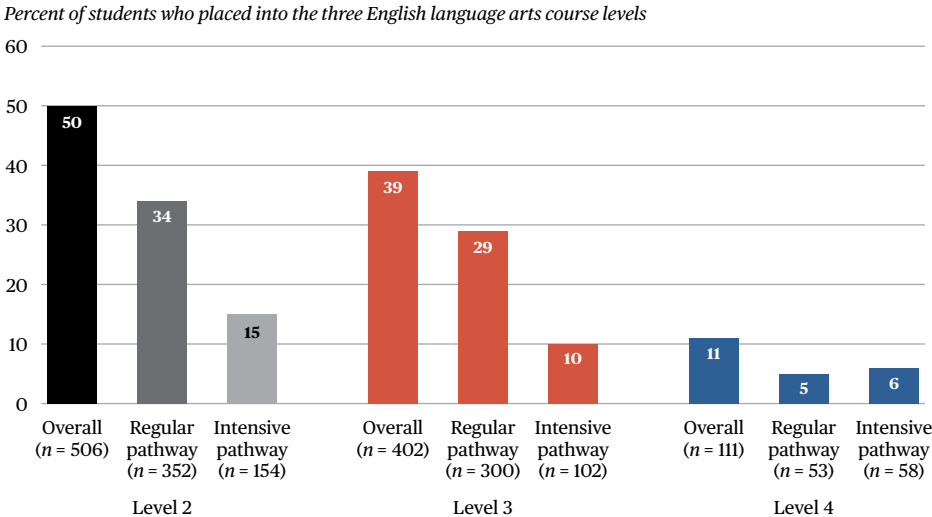
This section describes key findings. (See appendix C for additional details.)

Eleven percent of students who enrolled at the College of the Marshall Islands for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 placed into credit-bearing (Level 4) English language arts courses

Most students (89 percent) initially placed into developmental ELA courses (Levels 2 and 3), with higher percentages of students within each level placing into regular rather than intensive pathways (figure 2). A smaller percentage, 11 percent, placed into credit-bearing ELA courses, with 5 percent placing into the Level 4 regular pathway, and 6 percent placing into the Level 4 intensive pathway. This placement rate for credit-bearing courses is substantially lower than the 22 percent rate observed under CMI’s prior placement system (Shannon et al., 2021).

Among students placed into developmental courses (Levels 2 and 3), between two and three times as many enrolled in regular pathways as in intensive pathways, even though students who perform at the top 50 percent within each placement level are eligible for intensive pathways. This substantial difference between placement and enrollment suggests that there may be opportunities for CMI to increase students’ access to intensive pathways.

Figure 2. Eleven percent of students enrolling at the College of the Marshall Islands for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 placed into credit-bearing (Level 4) English language arts courses



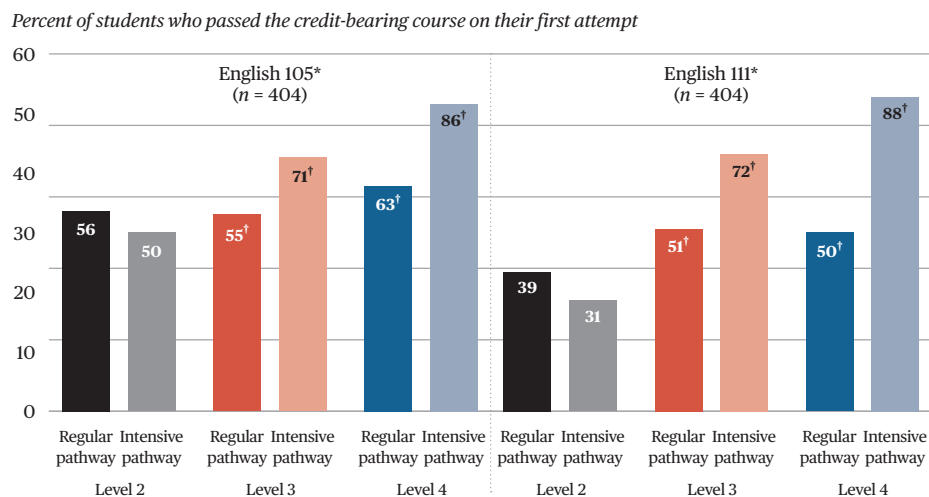
Note: Percentages might not sum to totals because of rounding. Level 2 and Level 3 courses are developmental, and Level 4 courses are credit bearing.
Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

Students placed into intensive pathways in Level 4 (credit-bearing) and Level 3 (developmental) courses in their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands had the highest passing rates in credit-bearing courses

Students initially placed into the Level 3 and Level 4 intensive pathways had the highest passing rates in credit-bearing ELA courses (English 105 Fundamentals of Speech and English 111 English Composition) on their first attempt (figure 3). Passing rates were lowest for students placed into Level 2 courses in their first year, particularly for students placed into the Level 2 intensive pathway. Additionally, the passing rates for both of the credit-bearing courses were higher for students initially placed into the Level 3 intensive pathway than for students initially placed into the Level 4 regular pathway. Passing rates for English 111 were similar for students initially placed into the Level 3 and Level 4 regular pathways. These findings suggest that intensive pathways may have the greatest benefit for students placed into Level 3 and Level 4 courses and that there may be benefits to increasing the number of students who place into intensive pathways at these levels. In contrast, students placed into the Level 2 intensive pathways may need additional supports to increase course passing rates. The findings also indicate that there may be only minimal differences in achievement between students placed into Level 3 and Level 4 courses.

Within each Level 4 course, passing rates also varied by initial placement. For credit-bearing English 105, 86 percent of students in the Level 4 intensive pathway in their first year passed the course on their first attempt, compared with 63 percent of students in the Level 4 regular pathway. In addition, 71 percent of students in the Level 3 intensive pathway in their first year later passed English 105 on their first attempt, compared with 55 percent of students in the Level 3 regular pathway. For credit-bearing English 111, 88 percent of students in the Level 4 intensive pathway in their first year passed the course on their first attempt, compared with 50 percent of students in the Level 4 regular pathway. In addition, 72 percent of students in the Level 3

Figure 3. Students placed into the Level 3 and Level 4 intensive pathways of English language arts courses in their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands between spring 2022 and spring 2024 had the highest passing rates for Level 4 courses on their first attempt



* The chi-square test was statistically significant (at $p < .05$), indicating that there were statistically significant differences across course pathway placements at all levels between the observed and expected percentages of students who passed the credit-bearing course on their first attempt.

† A substantial difference between regular and intensive pathways of 10 percentage points or larger.

Note: Level 2 and Level 3 courses are developmental, and Level 4 courses are credit bearing. The percentage of students who passed is the number of students in each course level placement who passed the Level 4 courses on their first attempt divided by the total number of students who placed into the Level 4 courses, multiplied by 100.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

intensive pathway in their first year later passed English 111 on their first attempt, compared with 51 percent of students in the Level 3 regular pathway. However, these differences in passing rates cannot be interpreted as an effect of pathway placement alone, because the extent to which these differences reflect students' initial ability, the pathway design, or a combination of the two is unknown.

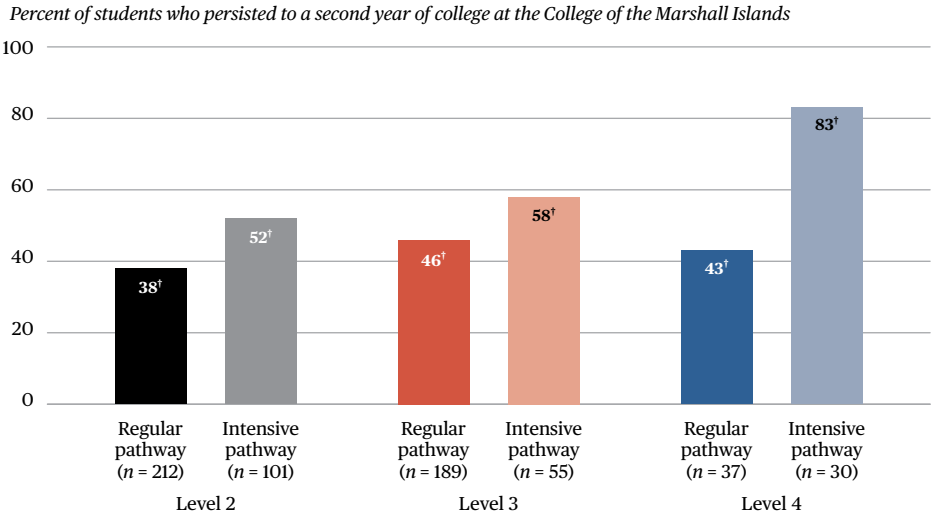
Students placed into intensive pathways had higher college persistence rates than those placed into regular pathways

Students placed into intensive pathways had substantially higher rates of persisting to a second year of college at CMI than students placed into regular pathways, regardless of course level (figure 4). In Level 4, 83 percent of students placed into the intensive pathway persisted to a second year of college, compared with 43 percent of students placed into the regular pathway. Persistence rates were highest for students in the Level 4 intensive pathway and lowest for students in the Level 2 regular pathway. Additionally, students in the Level 2 or Level 3 intensive pathway persisted to a second year of college at substantially higher rates than students in the Level 4 regular pathway. The finding that in Level 3 and Level 4, students in the intensive pathways had higher credit-bearing course passing rates than students in the regular pathways suggests that increasing access to intensive pathways by lowering their placement cutscores, coupled with additional supports for students in the Level 2 intensive pathway, may lead to increased persistence and credit-bearing course passing rates for CMI.

The multiple-choice component of the English language arts (ELA) course placement test was a strong measure of students' overall ELA performance

To examine the contribution of test items on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test to measuring ELA performance overall and by domain, a statistical approach was used. (See appendix B for

Figure 4. College persistence rates at all three levels of English language arts courses were higher for students placed into intensive pathways in their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands between spring 2022 and spring 2024



† A substantial group difference of 10 percentage points or larger.

Note: Level 2 and Level 3 courses are developmental, and Level 4 courses are credit bearing. The percentage of students who persisted is the number of students placed into each course pathway who persisted to a second year of college at the College of the Marshall Islands divided by the total number of students placed into each pathway, multiplied by 100. These totals do not include students in the spring 2023, summer 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024 cohorts because these students did not yet have a full year's worth of data. The chi-square test was statistically significant (at $p < .05$), indicating that there were statistically significant differences across course pathway placements between the observed and expected percentages of students who persisted.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

additional information about the statistical approach, a bifactor item response theory model.) Of the 75 total items on the test, 61 percent (46 items) demonstrated strong contributions to measuring ELA performance. However, few items made strong contributions to measuring performance on each of the three ELA test domains: vocabulary, language use, and sentence meaning. Each of the three domains included 25 items per group, and only 16 percent of vocabulary items (four items), 8 percent of language use items (two items), and 12 percent of sentence meaning items (three items) made strong contributions to measuring their respective ELA domains. These results suggest that items for the specific ELA domains provide little additional information about a student's performance beyond what is already described by the student's ELA performance overall (see tables C13 and C14 and figures C1 and C2 in appendix C for additional details).

The multiple-choice component of the English language (ELA) arts course placement test was most precise for students whose placement test performance would place them into developmental ELA courses

The ELA course placement test more precisely measured ELA performance for students whose scores on the multiple-choice component would place them into developmental (Level 2 and Level 3) ELA courses rather than into credit-bearing courses (Level 4).¹ This finding suggests that the precision of the test declines as ELA performance improves beyond the 40th percentile, which corresponds to placement into Level 3 courses. ELA performance estimates for students who would place into Level 4 courses largely fell below the threshold for high measurement precision. (See figures C3 and C4 in appendix C for additional details.)

The multiple-choice component of the English language arts (ELA) course placement test and students' high school grade point average similarly predicted passing credit-bearing ELA courses

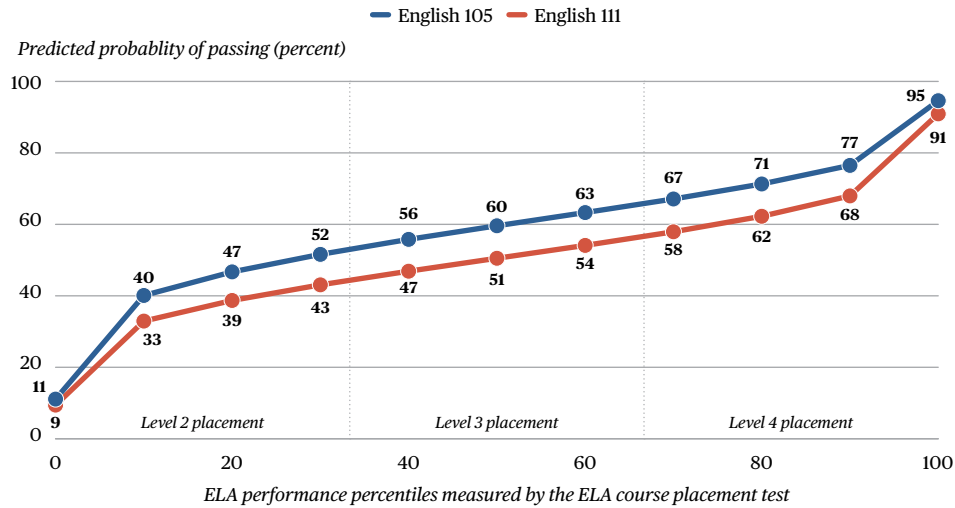
Students' performance on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test and their cumulative high school GPA were both statistically significant and positive predictors of passing credit-bearing ELA courses, after other factors were accounted for (figures 5 and 6).² Students' scores on the writing component of the ELA course placement test did not statistically significantly predict passing either of the credit-bearing courses after other factors were accounted for.

The multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test and cumulative high school GPA were similarly predictive of passing credit-bearing ELA courses. This is shown by similar standardized estimates of the relationships between passing rates on credit-bearing ELA courses (English 105 and English 111) and a one standard deviation increase on the multiple-choice component of the placement test and high school GPA (see tables C15 and C16 in appendix C). This suggests that the multiple-choice component of the placement test and high school GPA were similarly able to predict passing these credit-bearing courses. (See tables C15-C17 for additional details.) While using both measures may increase the predictive performance of the ELA course placement system, the results also suggest that using high school GPA alone could be a sufficient placement measure. Doing so would reduce CMI's substantial logistical burden and financial cost of administering the placement test to all incoming students (see tables D1 and D2 in appendix D for additional details).

For the two credit-bearing ELA courses (English 105 and English 111), having a greater than 50 percent probability of passing the courses would require different levels of scores on the ELA multiple-choice component, but the same level of cumulative high school GPA. To have a greater than 50 percent probability of passing English 105, students would need to perform at least at the 25th percentile on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test, which corresponds to Level 2 based on ELA course placement cutscores.

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1. Using cutscores alone on the ELA course placement test would place students whose performance percentiles are in the bottom third into Level 2, those whose percentiles are in the middle third into Level 3, and those whose percentiles are in the top third into Level 4.
 2. These findings are based on adjusted estimates from multivariate regression models that account for high school type and cohort, in addition to the three placement measures of performance: the multiple-choice component and the writing component of the ELA course placement test and cumulative high school GPA.

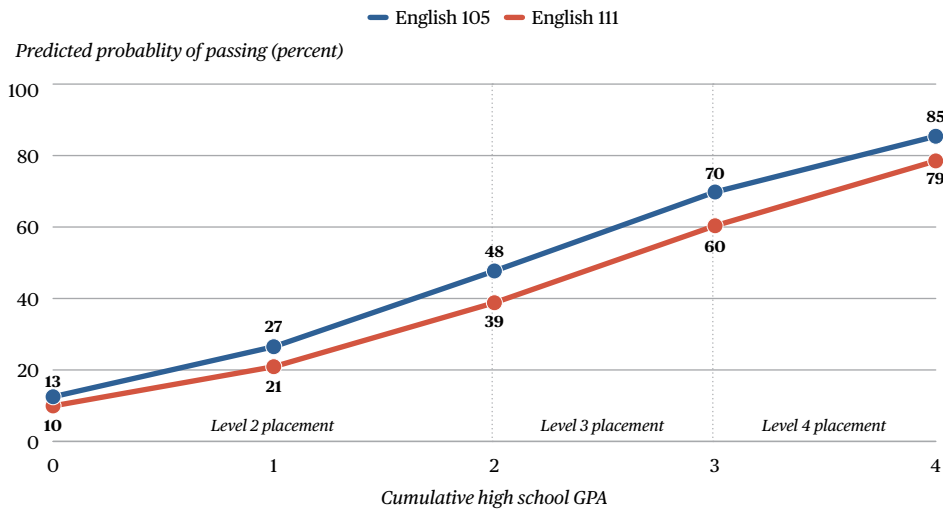
Figure 5. Students who would have placed into credit-bearing English language arts (ELA) courses between spring 2022 and spring 2024 based solely on performance on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test were more likely to pass the credit-bearing courses than students who would have placed into developmental courses



Note: $n = 381$. Level 2 and Level 3 courses are developmental, and Level 4 courses are credit bearing. The overall first-time passing rate for the sample is 64 percent for English 105 and 57 percent for English 111.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

Figure 6. Students who would have placed into credit-bearing English language arts courses between spring 2022 and spring 2024 based solely on high school grade point average (GPA) were more likely to pass the credit-bearing courses than students who would have placed into developmental courses



Note: $n = 381$. Level 2 and Level 3 courses are developmental, and Level 4 courses are credit bearing. The overall first-time passing rate for the sample is 64 percent for English 105 and 57 percent for English 111.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

However, to have a greater than 50 percent probability of passing English 111, students would need to perform at least at the 50th percentile, which corresponds to Level 3 based on ELA course placement cutscores. For both English 105 and English 111, to have a greater than 50 percent probability of passing, students would need a cumulative high school GPA between 2.00 and 2.99, which corresponds to a Level 3 placement.³

Implications

The study findings have several implications for supporting CMI's efforts to increase the number of students who initially place into credit-bearing ELA courses, pass credit-bearing classes, and persist to a second year at CMI.

Identify ways to increase the number of students placed into credit-bearing courses and intensive pathways

CMI could consider multiple approaches in its efforts to increase enrollment in credit-bearing courses. Research suggests that students placed into developmental courses have a reduced likelihood of academic success and college persistence compared with students placed into credit-bearing courses (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). A 2021 REL Pacific study found that 22 percent of students enrolling at CMI for the first time were placed into credit-bearing ELA courses under CMI's previous course placement process (Shannon et al., 2021). This study found a decline to 11 percent following systemic changes to the course placement process. However, for certain credit-bearing courses, the performance difference between Level 3 and Level 4 students is minimal, raising the question of whether Level 3 students should be placed directly into credit-bearing courses. One approach to address this issue could be to revise placement criteria, such as lowering the ELA course placement test cutscores for credit-bearing courses and for the intensive pathway at all levels.

CMI could also consider building on its efforts to increase enrollment in intensive pathways, particularly in credit-bearing courses (Level 4) and higher-level developmental courses (Level 3). This study found that students in intensive pathways of credit-bearing and higher-level developmental courses had the highest passing rates for credit-bearing courses and that students in intensive pathways, regardless of their initial placement level, had higher college persistence rates. Although these differences cannot be attributed solely to the intensive pathway, other research has found associations between accelerated developmental courses and positive early college outcomes (Boatman, 2021) and between providing more students with access to accelerated pathways and improved academic performance (Bickerstaff et al., 2022). Currently, students performing at the top 50 percent within each placement level are eligible for the intensive pathways, but substantially fewer students than are eligible enroll in intensive pathways of developmental courses (Level 2 or Level 3). CMI could also examine why fewer students than are eligible enroll in intensive pathways and consider strategies to increase enrollment in intensive pathways. Potential explanations for this gap include faculty discretion in placing students in regular rather than intensive pathways or eligible students choosing not to enroll in the intensive pathways because of lack of awareness or support or because of scheduling conflicts.

When considering adjustments to placement criteria or ways to increase enrollment in intensive pathways, CMI might need to consider the relative importance of increased college persistence versus lower passing rates for credit-bearing courses. This study found that students in the Level 2 intensive pathway had lower rates of passing credit-bearing courses but higher rates of persistence compared with students in the Level 2 regular pathway. These findings suggest that students in the Level 2 regular pathway potentially had more preparation for the credit-bearing courses, but the slower progression through ELA coursework might have contributed to lower persistence rates. This finding aligns with prior research that found that extended time to degree completion—sometimes due to factors such as remedial coursework or part-time enrollment—is associated with

3. Cutscores would place students whose cumulative high school GPA ranged from 0.00 to 1.99 in Level 2, from 2.00 to 2.99 in Level 3, and from 3.00 to 4.00 in Level 4.

higher dropout rates (Stewart et al., 2015; Yue & Fu, 2016). If CMI increases access to credit-bearing courses and intensive pathways, it might need to consider the risk of failure for students who might be unprepared for more advanced coursework and increase available supports for these students.

Consider course structure, alignment, and available supports for students

CMI might consider examining the structure of Level 2 courses and their alignment with higher-level ELA courses to better support students. Since the elimination of Level 1 courses, students with the lowest ELA performance have been placed into Level 2 courses, which may contribute to the lower passing rates for these students. Updating the Level 2 course curriculum to address the diverse needs of students now placed into this level could assist students who may need more support to prepare for credit-bearing courses. Additionally, CMI and RMI-PSS could continue to examine the alignment between their ELA courses and identify additional opportunities for collaboration. This might include jointly developing standards and learning objectives for ELA courses taught at CMI and at RMI public high schools to improve alignment across their institutions. Research suggests that alignment between high school and college coursework can be associated with positive early college outcomes (Lym, 2014).

CMI might also consider exploring differences between intensive pathways at different course levels and their relationships with student outcomes, as well as strategies to address any differences found. For example, examining potential differences in supports or instruction could help CMI identify factors contributing to lower passing rates in credit-bearing courses for students initially placed into Level 2 intensive pathways. Additionally, because students placed into the lowest-level courses may need more support to prepare for credit-bearing courses, CMI could examine whether Level 2 intensive pathways provide sufficient support and instructional time.

Furthermore, CMI might consider investigating why students in the intensive pathways had higher persistence rates than students in the regular pathways. Prior research has shown that accelerated developmental courses can be associated with better student outcomes than regular developmental courses (Boatman, 2021). But there may be other differences besides acceleration that are used in CMI's intensive pathway courses that could benefit students in the regular pathway courses, such as differences in instructional practices, course content, or additional supports for students.

Consider modifying the multiple-choice component of the English language arts course placement test to strengthen or remove weak items

ELA faculty at CMI might consider revising the items on the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test that were found to be weak measures of ELA performance and reducing the number of test items if the placement test is retained. Revising or removing test items that are weak predictors of ELA performance could reduce the testing burden on students while maintaining the test's capacity to assess overall ELA proficiency effectively.

Additionally, CMI could consider continuing to use its current statistical approach to generate percentiles of students' ELA performance overall rather than using a more complex approach that measures both overall ELA performance and ELA domain performance. This statistical approach is supported by the current study's findings that many ELA course placement test items were strong measures of ELA performance overall, while few items were strong measures of ELA domain performance (independent of ELA performance overall).

Furthermore, CMI could consider modifying the ELA course placement test to improve its accuracy in measuring ELA performance for higher-performing students. This study found that the ELA course placement test was more accurate at measuring ELA performance for students who would place into Level 2 developmental courses than for students who would place into Level 3 developmental courses or Level 4 credit-bearing courses on the basis of the multiple-choice component of the placement test alone. To potentially increase appropriate

course placement for Level 3 regular and intensive pathways and Level 4 credit-bearing courses, ELA faculty could consider adding more challenging items to improve the precision of the ELA course placement test for students who score above the 40th percentile. That change could help ensure that higher performing students are not incorrectly given a lower course placement, which could have adverse effects on their persistence and on-time graduation. CMI could also consider conducting research that explores how accurately a revised placement test would place students into appropriate course levels. Because the placement test currently accounts for 75 percent of students' final placement scores, it is important to explore these considerations to ensure placement test accuracy across all performance levels.

Further examine placement weights to improve course placement

CMI could consider revising its current placement weights and measures. CMI's ELA course placement process gives the greatest weight to students' scores on the multiple-choice and the writing components of the ELA course placement test and less weight to cumulative high school GPA. However, this study found that high school GPA and the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test similarly predicted passing the credit-bearing courses, while the writing component scores did not significantly predict passing these courses. A previous REL Pacific study found that high school GPA positively predicted earning all credits attempted during students' first year at CMI and persisting to a second year of college (Shannon et al., 2021). Other research suggests that course placement processes that draw on multiple measures, especially those that include high school GPA rather than just placement tests, can provide a more holistic view of students' academic preparedness and improve access to credit-bearing courses (Kopko et al., 2023).

This study's findings combined with previous research suggest two options that CMI could consider for its placement weights. One option would be to use only cumulative high school GPA in making placement decisions. This option would come at the cost of slightly reduced placement precision but would lead to substantial logistical and financial cost savings. The option would also reduce the test-taking burden on students and potentially remove additional barriers to enrolling at CMI, such as students missing the date on which the test is offered. The second option that CMI could consider is to drop the writing component of the ELA course placement test, increase the high school GPA weight to match or exceed that of the multiple-choice component of the placement test, and revise some of the placement test's multiple-choice items as discussed above. This option would streamline the placement process and could improve the placement system's accuracy.

Examine the requirements to pass English 105 and English 111 and consider sequencing the courses

CMI could consider examining differences between the requirements and outcomes for the two credit-bearing ELA courses at CMI (English 105 and English 111) to determine whether different cutscores would sufficiently improve course placement or whether these courses should be taken in a specific sequence. Currently, CMI students can either take English 105 or English 111 first or take them simultaneously. However, this study found a higher probability of passing English 105 than English 111, suggesting that passing English 111 might require somewhat higher ELA performance than passing English 105. Introducing different cutscores for the two courses could improve course placement precision without affecting course sequencing. However, if students would be better prepared for English 111 after completing English 105, requiring them to take the two courses in that sequence could improve their likelihood of success in English 111. CMI might consider further examining student performance data and faculty insights to determine whether modifying cutscores or requiring sequencing for these courses would better support student learning and progression.

Consider using Marshallese to supplement instruction in English

To increase graduation rates and provide more opportunities for the student population it serves, CMI might consider increasing the use of Marshallese to supplement instruction in English. The finding that just 11 percent of students enrolling at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 placed into credit-bearing

ELA courses may reflect in part the fact that the language of instruction at CMI is English, while the official language of RMI, the community, and RMI-PSS is Marshallese. Nearly all (96 percent) of the CMI student population speaks Marshallese at home, and only 27 percent of students in grades 10 and 12 were reported to be proficient in English (Republic of the Marshall Islands Public School System, 2018). Additionally, students initially placed into Level 2 ELA courses had the lowest passing rates for Level 4 ELA courses.

Because passing Level 4 ELA courses is required for graduation, RMI students at CMI with the lowest English proficiency face obstacles to earning a degree at CMI. Research outside of RMI has shown that instruction and testing in a language other than the home language are associated with lower academic performance (Bernhofer & Tonin, 2022). CMI might consider using Marshallese in Level 2 ELA courses to support students in learning English. Prior research indicates that bilingualism emerges from one's prior language abilities and that using one's home language in the classroom strongly aids in learning a new language, such as English (García, 2009; García & Lin, 2014; May, 2014).

Research also suggests that providing instructors with professional development opportunities related to supporting multilingual learners, increasing the accessibility of instruction, and developing bilingual education programs are associated with improved academic performance for multilingual students (Ball et al., 2024; Short et al., 2011). CMI and RMI-PSS could also consider providing additional training to improve teacher capacity to instruct and support multilingual learners.

Implications for other contexts

The results of this study extend beyond meeting the needs expressed by CMI and RMI-PSS. The study findings contribute to the broader research base on using multiple-measures assessment and college-developed course placement tests—including the predictive abilities of the measures—to inform course placement decisions. Given the similar ability of both cumulative high school GPA and the multiple-choice component of the ELA course placement test to predict whether students pass credit-bearing ELA courses, research could examine the relative importance of various measures in predicting passing rates for credit-bearing courses in other contexts. Additionally, given this study's findings and research that point to the importance of high school GPA in predicting early college outcomes (Rentz et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2021), other institutions might consider how they weight high school GPA in their course placement decisions. This study also provides evidence that intensive pathways, which can lead to faster completion of developmental courses for higher-performing students, may improve college persistence. Other institutions in the Pacific region that have similar intensive programs, such as the College of Micronesia-FSM's Achieving College Excellence Program, might wish to reflect on these findings. Considering that more than 95 percent of CMI's student population are English learners (Republic of the Marshall Islands Public School System, 2018), the study's results might be useful for other institutions that have large English learner populations.

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