



Hot Topics in Higher Education



Reforming Remedial Education

By Brenda Bautsch

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The number of high school students who enroll in college after graduation is on the rise. Many students, however, are surprised to discover they have failed placement tests and must enroll in remedial courses. This detour from college-level courses can be costly in terms of both time and money. It often can mean the end of the college road for the students.

States are working to help students avoid remedial education through better preparation in high school. Inevitably, however, some students still will need remediation. During the recent recession, many adults who were displaced from the workforce returned to college to gain skills for a new job. Those adults also may need to take remedial courses to refresh their skills. Helping all students successfully pass remedial and college-level courses can significantly improve their chances for success and increase college completion rates. This brief provides an overview of remedial education and highlights strategies states are taking to help remedial students earn a degree.

What Is Remedial Education?

Remedial education refers to classes taken on a college campus that are below college-level. Students pay tuition and can use financial aid for remedial courses, but they do not receive college credit. Most remediation occurs in reading, writing and math. Within and among states, “remedial” often is used interchangeably with the terms “developmental” and “basic skills.” In this brief, remedial education refers to all classes below college-level that are taken by college students.

Methods vary among postsecondary institutions for determining which students are placed in remedial education. Some use national college admissions exams, such as the ACT or SAT, to determine if students are eligible to enroll in college-level courses. Other institutions require students to take a placement exam, such as Accuplacer or COMPASS, before they register for courses. At the end of the exam, the students are given a list of the courses they should take, based on their performance. The scores students must achieve to place into college-level courses vary by institution in some states (e.g., California) and are standardized in others (e.g., West Virginia).

Fast Facts

- The need for remediation is widespread. When considering all first-time undergraduates, studies have found anywhere from 28 percent to 40 percent of students enroll in at least one remedial course.¹ When looking at only community college students, several studies have found remediation rates surpassing 50 percent.²
- Nontraditional adults comprise a significant portion of remedial students. Adults who have been out of high school for some time and are returning to college to earn a degree or receive job training often need to take remedial courses to brush up on their math, reading or writing skills. More than 42 million Americans ages 18 to 64 do not hold a postsecondary degree and would likely need remediation if they pursue one.³

This brief is part of the series “Hot Topics in Higher Education,” written for state policymakers.

Discussed in this brief:

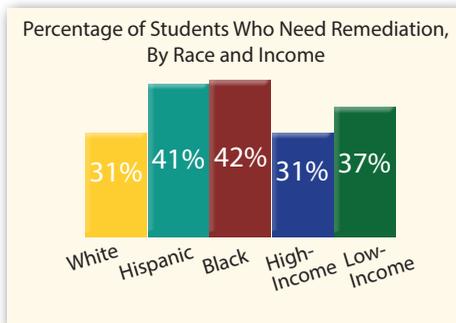
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Implement Preventive Strategies

Encourage Colleges to Implement Remedial Education

Collect and Use Data, Data, Data

- Low-income, Hispanic and African-American students are more likely to need remediation than their wealthier, white peers. Forty-one percent of Hispanic students and 42 percent of African-American students require remediation, compared to 31 percent of white students.
- Students are not testing at college-ready levels on national assessments. Only 25 percent of students who took the ACT met the test's readiness benchmarks in all four subjects (English, reading, math and science) in 2012. A mere 5 percent of African Americans and 13 percent of Hispanics met the readiness benchmarks in all four subjects.⁴
- Remediation is costly for states to provide and for students to take. Strong American Schools estimates the costs of remedial education to states and students at around \$2.3 billion each year.
- Compounding the costs is the fact that remedial students are more likely to drop out of college without a degree. Less than 50 percent of remedial students complete their recommended remedial courses. Less than 25 percent of remedial students at community colleges earn a certificate or degree within eight years.⁵
- Students in remedial reading or math have particularly dismal chances of success. A U.S. Department of Education study found that 58 percent of students who do not require remediation earn a bachelor's degree, compared to only 17 percent of students enrolled in remedial reading and 27 percent of students enrolled in remedial math.⁶
- Lowering remediation rates will save money. The Alliance for Excellent Education suggests that reducing the need for remediation could generate an extra \$3.7 billion annually from decreased spending on the delivery of remedial education and increased tax revenue from students who graduate with a bachelor's degree.⁷



lack of awareness, some states administer tests during the sophomore or junior year of high school to measure college readiness. Students who score poorly can take courses in 12th grade to prepare for college-level work, which helps decrease the chance they will need remediation. Through California's Early Assessment Program, for example, 11th graders can choose to take a test that gauges their English and math readiness. A 2009 study at Sacramento State found that, in the five years since the program's implementation, remediation rates dropped by 6 percent for English and 4 percent for math.

Many students also are unaware of what the college assessment and placement process entails. A study by the education group WestEd found that many California community college students view assessment and placement as a "one-shot deal."⁸ Students take the required entrance assessment, they are provided with a recommended course list based on the results, and then they enroll in those courses.

Students often do not consult counselors to discuss their courses or options to retake the test. Some students may not be aware that the placement tests determine which classes they are allowed to take, so they do not take the test seriously. The WestEd study recommends that policymakers and higher education leaders work together to promote awareness among students about what it means to be college ready and how the assessment and placement process works.

Encourage Colleges to Innovate Remedial Education

While preventing students from needing remedial education is the fundamental goal, improving the success of those who require remediation also deserves the attention of higher education leaders and policymakers. State legislators can be key actors in the reform and improvement of remedial education. Legislators can encourage colleges and universities to develop and experiment with innovative approaches. States such as California and Texas have appropriated money to research and development of new, effective remedial education strategies. Colorado, Connecticut and Virginia have made state and system policies flexible so institutions can use innovative methods to teach remedial courses.⁹

Research on the types of remedial programs that are successful is not conclusive. However, some promising new approaches states are trying are discussed below.

What Can Legislators Do?

Implement Preventative Strategies

A disconnect exists between K-12 and postsecondary expectations. Students often are unaware that they are not ready for college-level courses until they fail college placement tests and are assigned to remedial courses. To prevent that



- Accelerated courses. Students can complete their remedial courses at a faster pace by taking accelerated courses. At the Community College of Denver, for example, students in the FastStart program take two semesters of remediation in one semester. The program provides students with extra supports, such as a required weekly study group. Students in FastStart have greater academic success than remedial students who are not in the program.¹⁰ Colorado has adjusted system policies around enrollment data and financial aid eligibility to allow operation of programs such as FastStart.
- Learning communities. Kingsborough Community College, in New York, has had success with a learning community program in which a group of freshmen take three classes together: remedial English, a college-level course and a student success course (an orientation-type class that provides tips on how to study, use campus resources, etc.). By taking several classes with the same group, students have an opportunity to befriend and support one another. The extra academic and social supports that learning communities provide can have positive effects. Students who participated in the Kingsborough learning community were more likely than nonparticipants to take and pass the English skills assessment tests necessary to enroll in college-level English.¹¹
- Remedial course redesign. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) has developed a research-based course redesign method that improves student outcomes while reducing course delivery costs. The method's strategies are to increase the use of computer-based learning techniques, reduce lecture time, and increase time for lab and group work.¹² In 2006, the Texas Legislature passed the Texas Course Redesign Project, which allocated several years of funding to the redesign of remedial and other entry-level college courses.¹³
- Place borderline remedial students in college-level courses with extra student supports. Research suggests that students who test just below college-ready can be successful in college-level courses, especially if extra academic support—such as tutoring and group study time—is incorporated into the class. The Community College of Baltimore's Accelerated Learning Project places borderline remedial English students into college-level English. To provide extra support, the project requires students to take an additional course that serves as a study hour for the English class. Both courses are

taught by the same professor. A study by the Community College Research Center found that students in the program were more likely to pass the first two college-level English courses (English 101 and 102) than students not in the program.

- Combine remedial courses with job training. Washington's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program has become a national model for helping students who test into the lowest levels of remediation earn a job-related credential. The program is particularly effective for adult basic education students and English language learners. I-BEST students' curriculum combines basic skills education with college-credit, career training courses. Early data show that I-BEST students are more likely to earn a job-related credential than similar students not enrolled in the program.¹⁴

Collect and Use Data, Data, Data

An Education Commission of the States review of state reports on remedial education found that most states collect data on student participation in remedial education, although most follow only recent high school graduates, not all new students. Some states also collect data on student success in remedial courses and on the cost of remediation. The study found only eight states collect information on participation, success and cost.¹⁵

To develop a complete picture of how remedial students are performing, states should collect data not only on how many recent high school graduates enroll in remedial courses, but also on other important progress indicators, including:

- How many first-time college students enroll in remedial courses;
- How many remedial students complete their remedial courses;
- How many of those students complete college-level courses;
- How many of those students persist year to year;
- How many of those students earn a degree; and
- How long it takes them to earn that degree.

Monitoring student performance at each of these levels can be further enhanced by disaggregating the data by categories such as age, race, gender and level of remediation.

Collecting solid data is only the first step, however. States then can analyze the data to identify trends in who is being placed into remedial education and what the results are for those students. Analyzing data can reveal which courses, programs and policy initiatives are successful and which are

not. With such information at hand, states can better target their strategies to certain students and programs in order to improve and prevent remedial education. Some states are incorporating the success of remedial students into their performance-based funding systems.¹⁶ Collecting and interpreting useful data is an essential step states can take to implement effective remedial education policies.

Summary

Remedial education is one of the biggest pitfalls students encounter. While more students are enrolling in college today than ever, many are assigned to remedial courses that delay—and for some, ultimately prevent—their attainment of a college degree. To increase college completion rates, states can implement preventative strategies, encourage innovative remedial education programs, and collect and use more and better data.

Notes

1. Strong American Schools, *Diploma to Nowhere* (Washington D.C.: Strong American Schools, 2008); Paul Attewell, David Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey, “New Evidence on College Remediation,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 5 (September/October 2006): 886–924.
2. Bruce Vandal, *Getting Past Go: Rebuilding the Remedial Education Bridge to College Success* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2010); Complete College America, *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere* (Washington, D.C.: Complete College America, 2012).
3. Ibid.
4. ACT Inc., *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2012* (Iowa City: ACT Inc., 2012).
5. Thomas Bailey, *Rethinking Remedial Education in Community College*, CCRC Brief No. 40 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2009).
6. John Wirt et al., *The Condition of Education 2004*, NCES 2004-077 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004).
7. Alliance for Excellent Education, *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation* (Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006), 3-6.

8. Andrea Venezia, Kathy Reeves Bracco, and Thad Nodine, *One-shot deal? Students’ perceptions of assessment and course placement in California’s community colleges* (San Francisco: WestEd, 2010).

9. Michael Lawrence Collins, *Setting Up Success in Remedial Education: How State Policy Can Help Community Colleges Improve Student Success Outcomes* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2009).

10. Jobs for the Future, *The Remedial Education Initiative: State Policy Framework & Strategy* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2010).

11. *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program at Kinsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2008), ES-5 - ES-6.

12. Carol Twigg, *Increasing Success for Underserved Students: Redesigning Introductory Courses* (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.: The National Center for Academic Transformation, 2005).

13. *Texas Course Redesign Project*, 2013.

14. Matthew Zeidenberg, Sung-Woo Cho, and Davis Jenkins, *Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST): New Evidence of Effectiveness*, CCRC Working Paper No. 20 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2010).

15. Mary Fulton, *State Reporting on Remedial Education: Analysis of Findings* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2010).

16. For more information on performance-based funding, see the NCSL brief, *Performance Funding for Higher Education*.

Resources

The following list of resources provides further guidance on state policy on remedial education.

Alliance for Excellent Education, *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation*, 2006.

The California State University, *Early Assessment Program*, 2011.

Complete College America, *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere*, 2012

Education Commission of the States, *Getting Past Go Project*, 2013.

Education Commission of the States, *Choosing Who Delivers: The Impact of Placing Limits on the Delivery of Remedial Education at Four-Year Institutions*, 2012.

Education Commission of the States, *Using State Policies to Ensure Effective Assessment and Placement in Remedial Education*, 2012.

Jobs for the Future, *Setting Up Success in Remedial Education: How State Policy Can Help Community Colleges Improve Student Success Outcomes*, 2009.

Jobs for the Future, *The Remedial Education Initiative: State Policy Framework & Strategy*, 2010.

Strong American Schools, *Diploma to Nowhere*, 2008.

National Conference of State Legislatures, *Improving College Completion: Gathering Information—Tips for Legislators*.

National Governors Association, *Complete to Compete: Common College Completion Metrics*, 2010.

WestEd, *One-shot deal? Students’ perceptions of assessment and course placement in California’s community colleges*, 2010.

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