As Reformers Take Aim at Remediation, Community Colleges Feel the Squeeze

By Katherine Mangan | SEPTEMBER 21, 2016

With students whose average age is 28, community colleges are used to attracting people who haven’t been in a classroom in more than a decade. But the students who are crowding into remedial classes this fall also include hundreds of thousands of recent high-school graduates who lack the skills needed to succeed in college.

As more such students enroll, the debates over remedial, or developmental, education have intensified.

To some, the field remains a necessary bridge to a college degree and a way to ensure that college classes retain their rigor. To others, it is a trap that prevents too many students from graduating.
But as educators and policy makers tweak and trim to get students into college classes more quickly, compromises are emerging that reflect a more nuanced understanding of the challenges underprepared students face. Bite-sized modules and concurrent remedial and college-level classes are helping better-prepared students move ahead while the least-prepared students continue to struggle.

The stakes are huge for colleges that promise to meet students where they are and provide them with a college education. Where they are may be miles from the finish line.

Nearly two-thirds of students entering community colleges are required to take remedial or developmental mathematics or English courses before they can take college-level classes, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

Many of them, discouraged and in debt, drop out before they get to their first college-level class, the center’s research has shown.

Remedial educators say it’s unfair to blame the programs for the students’ struggles; after all, many of them enroll with glaring academic deficiencies. The classes are disproportionately filled with low-income, minority, and first-generation students who attended underperforming schools. They often have needs, like child care and transportation, that extend well beyond the classroom. And most of the courses are taught by adjuncts who lack the training and support that full-time faculty members receive.

"There is no question that we could and should do a better job of remediation," says Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education, based at Appalachian State University. But claiming that remediation causes dropouts is like "claiming that statues cause pigeons."
Relations between remedial educators and reform-minded groups like Complete College America have been testy at times, as the push to limit stand-alone remedial classes gains traction in statehouses around the country.

"Journalists, bloggers, and advocacy groups with little understanding of the realities on the ground have made up the mantra that ‘remediation doesn’t work — let’s get rid of it,’” Mr. Boylan wrote in an email. "Then they have all quoted each other. This echo chamber has created a mythology that drives policy makers, frequently, toward rash actions."

**Best Practices**

Such actions, he says, include reformers’ recent calls to allow the vast majority of students to enroll directly in a college-credit course, regardless of their academic qualifications.

Over the past couple of years, though, groups on both sides of the developmental-education debate have started to collaborate on studies of best practices.

"When I visit campuses, I don’t see the faculty fighting with the data as much," says Karen A. Stout, chief executive of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit group that focuses on student success strategies in community colleges.

One point that few would disagree with today is that students with skills below middle school aren’t ready for college-level classes, even with tutoring on the side. But helping them cross that chasm remains one of the biggest challenges facing open-door institutions.

Eastern Connecticut State U.

Elsa Núñez, president of Eastern Connecticut State U. (shown here with a student), helped lead public colleges’ response after state lawmakers placed limits on remedial education.
"We’re still leaving those students behind," says Ms. Stout, who served for 14 years as president of Montgomery County Community College, in Pennsylvania.

That fear — that some fast-track options might set the least-prepared students up for failure — is a big concern in Florida, where state lawmakers decided in 2013 to make remedial classes optional for most recent high-school graduates.

An influx of unprepared students caused headaches for some professors and a drop in success rates for entry-level college courses.

"Students were opting out, and they were getting to their credit course without the foundations they needed," says Marta Cronin, vice president for academic affairs at Indian River State College, in Fort Pierce.

But the law also forced colleges to be creative in their approaches to remediation and to fast-track experiments that were already underway.

Across the state, students now can complete a refresher class in eight weeks instead of 16. Some campuses offer "corequisite" courses that allow students to take a remedial class alongside a credit-bearing one.

Indian River is among the open-access two-year institutions in Florida that allow students to tackle just the specific skills they’re lacking in modules, rather than a full course. Faculty members administer their own diagnostic tests to create personalized "prescriptions" for each student. A module might cover fractions, or, for a more advanced remedial student, quadratic equations.

One-fifth of the students in developmental math there are taking such courses.

The approach has helped students like Marc Syle. "Whenever you get lost, you can go back and watch the video until you get it," he said during a pause in his module on dividing and multiplying whole numbers. But when he’s ready to move ahead, he doesn’t have to wait for the rest of the class to catch up.
The technique has helped increase the proportion of students who passed remedial math courses from 67.4 percent in the fall of 2014 to 76.8 percent last year, Indian River officials say.

The college plans to pilot module courses in English and reading in the spring.

**College Readiness**

Older community-college students often have rusty academic skills, especially in math. But a lot of students who are fresh out of high school also struggle with the transition to college, as evidenced by the latest scores on the ACT, which measures academic skills that are considered important for success in first-year college courses.

This year 38 percent of those tested met college-readiness benchmarks in at least three of four core subject areas — English, math, reading, and science. That’s down from 40 percent in 2015.

Meanwhile, the percentage of graduates who failed to meet any of the four benchmarks climbed from 31 percent in 2015 to 34 percent this year.

Some of that decline is probably because high schools are pushing more students to take the test as they try to increase college enrollment, especially among students in underrepresented groups.

Nevertheless, "when a third of high-school graduates are not well prepared in any of the core subject areas, college and career readiness remains a significant problem that must be addressed," Marten Roorda, the ACT’s chief executive, said in a written statement.
That's exactly what remedial classes are designed to do. "At face value, eliminating remediation when our performance metrics indicate so many students are unprepared would seem to clash," says Paul Weeks, a senior vice president at ACT who favors customized modules for many students. "But it's an acknowledgment that something has to give because traditional forms of remediation aren't working."

ACT last year decided to phase out its Compass placement examination amid widespread recognition that it directs too many students into remedial classes. Instead, ACT supports the growing trend to consider a variety of factors, including grade-point averages and noncognitive factors like "grit," to place students.

Paul Attewell, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, studies strategies that cause students in non-elite colleges to drop out. He supports efforts to create different math pathways for students, depending on their chosen field of study.

"We have undergraduate degrees in applied subjects like massage therapy that require students to master math skills that include factoring polynomials," says Mr. Attewell. That, he says, doesn’t make sense.

Some faculty members have pushed back, arguing that programs like Statway and Quantway, which accelerate students through remedial math with real-world applications, water down standards.

**One State's Response**

Similar arguments have played out in Connecticut, where in 2012 lawmakers passed legislation aimed at getting students into college-level classes quickly. The law requires public colleges to use multiple assessments to place students and restricts students to one semester of remedial coursework.
Students had complained that the existing approach forced them to march in lockstep through a series of lengthy requirements, "taking courses that don’t count that were eating up their financial aid," says Elsa Núñez, president of Eastern Connecticut State University. "They felt like they were majoring in remediation."

The legislation, which alarmed many faculty members who feared they’d have to dumb down their classes, "did succeed in shaking up the bureaucracy," says Ms. Núñez. She has helped lead the response from her university and the 16 others — including 12 community colleges — that make up the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system.

To comply with the legislation, the system created three tiers for remedial help. Those who were closest to the cutoff score for placement in college classes could sign up for them, along with additional support, either in a summer boot camp or extra tutoring during the semester.

Students who were a little less prepared could receive an intensive single semester of stand-alone remedial coursework. The bottom tier, which represented students with reading levels below sixth grade who hadn’t advanced in math beyond basic arithmetic, remain the hardest to reach.

They were placed in free, noncredit "transitional programs" that combine remedial coursework with counseling and nonacademic support.

Students have been doing better in the accelerated classes, possibly because they know that after a semester, they’ll be able to enroll in credit-bearing classes. says Ms. Núñez. But with lingering concerns over the impact on the weakest students, "We don’t have enough data to say, ‘Look at our model. We’re successful,’" she says. "We still don’t know — is this sustainable over time?"

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