Lost Before They Start

When remedial education programs are evaluated, a frequent measure is course completion — what percentage of students successfully complete various remedial courses. But what if the most significant failures are happening outside the classroom? That’s exactly what is happening, according to a new analysis of remedial education at community colleges, which finds that the institutions are losing students before they even start, and that completing individual courses — while obviously important — may not be the key factor in the effectiveness of remedial programs.

In fact, while the study finds that the majority of people who enroll in a community college remedial course pass the course, that truth may obscure the very real problems in getting students through the remedial courses they may need to do college level work. For example:

- Only between 3 and 4 of every 10 students referred to a remedial education sequence to prepare for college-level work actually complete the sequence.
- Most students who don’t complete the sequence abandon it early on — with almost half failing to complete the first course in a sequence.
- More students exit a remedial sequence they have been urged to take by failing to enroll in the very first course, than by actually failing a course in which they are enrolled.
- Of students who are identified as three or more levels below college-level work, more than 40 percent never enroll in the first course.
- For many students who don’t complete that first course, their college education is effectively over and they tend not to return (at least in the three-year period studied by the researchers).
- While these trends are not unique to any demographic group, they are most prevalent among students who are black or male or older or are enrolled part time.

“As it stands now, developmental education sequences must appear confusing, intimidating, and boring to many students entering community colleges,” says the report, “Referral, Enrollment and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges.” The study was released by the Community College Research Center of Teachers College, Columbia University. The authors are Thomas Bailey, director of the center; Dong Wood Jeong, who received his Ph.D. at Teachers College; and Sung-Woo Cho, who is working on a Ph.D. there.

The importance of remedial education at community colleges is clear from basic statistics, cited in the study.
More than half of community college students enroll in at least one remedial course during their time in college, and 43 percent of first- and second-year students at community colleges took at least one remedial course during the year they were surveyed. The cost of these remedial efforts is estimated to be significantly more than $1 billion annually.

Whether the students succeed in remedial courses has become a top issue for educators and policy groups. The new study was supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education through the Achieving the Dream program, which aims to help more community college students complete their programs. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which in November announced an unprecedented plan to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on community colleges, has identified completion as a key goal, with specific reference to the role played by remedial education.

The data in the study are from an Achieving the Dream database with information about 250,000 students from 57 colleges in 7 states. While the study acknowledges that these colleges and their students are not completely representative, a national database was used for comparison purposes, and suggested the study’s findings would apply equally to institutions and students outside of the Achieving the Dream program.

The key methodological difference between this study and previous efforts is its focus on sequences rather than individual courses. For many students, the authors note, remedial education isn’t a matter of brushing up on a few things forgotten from high school, but is a course of study involving several courses covering important material never mastered by the student. Students with significant need in remedial mathematics (a common issue for new community college students) may need to take and pass courses in pre-collegiate arithmetic, basic algebra and intermediate algebra before being able to enroll in a college-level mathematics course.

The study defines sequence as including not only the courses but the system by which remedial needs are identified and students are guided into their first course and from course to course.

The authors make several related recommendations based on their findings. First, they say that college leaders wanting to improve the odds for remedial courses need to focus not just on the classroom, but on what happens in between courses.

In particular, the authors urge colleges to focus on what happens before and after the placement process in which students are identified as needing remedial instruction. Colleges need to make “a major effort to counsel and guide students perhaps even before their initial assessment,” the report says. And for those who make it into the first course, the report says, “contextualized developmental courses that quickly connect remedial instruction to a student’s occupational interests also seem promising.” In some cases, to show students the value of program completion, “a college might offer students an opportunity to take appropriately designed occupational courses before subjecting them to remedial instruction,” the report says.

Other ideas proposed would change the way remedial education is organized and delivered. “Perhaps colleges should combine two or three levels of instruction into one longer, more intensive course,” the study says. “At the very least, concerted efforts should be made to encourage students who complete one course in their sequence to go on to the next. This might involve abandoning the semester schedule to prevent gaps between courses, or registering and scheduling students for the next course in a sequence while they are still in the previous course.”

The bottom line, the authors write, is that minor adjustments won’t do the trick: “Given these low completion rates, community colleges in general need to consider fundamental changes in their approaches to remediation — modest improvements will not solve much of the problem.”

— Scott Jaschik

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Remedial Courses and Intrinsic Motivation

Scott, Thanks for a glimpse of a high priority issue, and the key recent developments. The notion that remedial courses be attached to vocational interests is likely an important starting place. My colleagues in research are finding the ultimate need for a sense of purpose in education, regardless of one’s learning challenges or knowledge status. It takes consideration of both challenges and passion/interests (see “Purpose-Guided Student, McGraw-Hill, “Developing Students Purposefully,” Anker, “Explorer’s Guide,” Kendal Hunt, etc., and the old controversial work by Alfie Kohn, “Punished by Rewards.”). Also, the folks at NADE (National Association for Developmental Education) have been looking at fresh approaches and recent studies as well. Their (reasonably priced) national conference is coming up in late Feb.— http://www.nade.net/. Again, thanks for this important subject. The Lumina Foundation, Lilly, and groups like Pathways have contributed significantly to this discussion. Their resources are excellent and easily accessible for those interested, e.g., http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/. JP

Jerry Pattengale, Assistant Provost at Indiana Wesleyan University, at 7:30 am EST on January 19, 2009

why wait for the remedial course

Perhaps we could avoid some of the problem of remedial course completion by using strategies at the high school level that are associated with completion of remedial courses at the college level.

I taught college writing courses to students who had had years of writing on non-school topics ranging from the legal drinking age to “the best thing in the ditch.” When I forced them to write on course-related material, even if they were not interested in the subject (few were), they did much better writing. Finding ways to tie classes to concrete applications is fairly simple and very cheap compared to the cost of remediation.

Linda Aragoni, at 8:30 am EST on January 19, 2009

Interesting and relevant topic! For starters I think the term “remedial” is one that ought to be looked at and reevaluated. Many students I know are turned away from attending college just because they would have to take “remedial” classes which, 1) make students feel bad about themselves, 2) will not give them credit toward graduation, 3) will cost just as much as a for credit course.

So what is the draw here? It is no wonder most students drop out of the remedial track before taking the first class. Guidance before and in between these classes, and a true effort to retain these students is a top priority. In order to do this we will need to help students understand the value of these courses.

On the college end, we need to make sure that we are placing real value on remedial courses, give students credit for the work they are doing and paying for, and make sure these classes do not become dumping grounds for the most needy students.

Admission Counselor, at 9:05 am EST on January 19, 2009

And Reduce the Cost of Failure

While most of the recommendations are understandably focused on improving success rates by changing
sequences, an often ignored part of the equation is the cost of failure. When students enroll and fail, the student is often saddled with debts that they have an even poorer chance of paying off and the state wastes money on failed students. Alternative pricing and tuition models — such as subscription pricing (i.e., pricing by how long a student takes to finish a course) — can reduce the cost of failure. Reducing the cost of failure gives the student more opportunities to try again and reduces the states’ cost burden.

**Burck Smith**, CEO at SMARTHINKING/Straighterline, at 9:35 am EST on January 19, 2009

**Enroll All in 101**

After decades of failure, I gave up trying to persuade my colleagues in English to abolish remedial and developmental writing and to enroll every student in Composition One, give its instructors the R (re-enroll) grade, limit the number in each class to 18, and require a portfolio, so that writing students could receive credit toward their degrees if they passed, build upon previous writing if they got R, work gradually toward completion of their portfolios both in class and, with tutorial and Writing Center help, out of class, even at home, and enroll as many times as necessary until the required writing was satisfactorily completed.

Advantages?

No so-called writing placement test which asks for no writing, no label like Dumbbell English, no expensive class that doesn’t accrue credit toward a degree, no (or at least fewer) numbing drills on usage and mechanics, no dinky, condescending reading and writing assignments, plus the motivation provided by being in a class with better writers, much easier placement, advising, and registration, and more, all of this supported by research.

**Bob Schenck**, at 10:05 am EST on January 19, 2009

**Wrong incentives**

This is a response to Burck Smith’s assertion that providing a financial incentive to finish the course quicker is the answer. I think that is a bit off the mark. I agree that students need to be incentivized to move through the program, but students need to be supported with academic incentives and support. To provide successful remediation, we must work with the student to identify the weaknesses and mentor them through the process. I think additional support services like Mr. Smith’s Smarthinking tutoring are fantastic — but its based on quality interaction — not on speed to finish.

**Don Kassner**, President at Andrew Jackson University, at 10:25 am EST on January 19, 2009

**Lost before they start**

I’m an adjunct in a 9-13 month certificate granting program at a multi-campus college in NYC. The enrolling of underqualified students in our program impacts adversely on our retention rates, graduation rates, and ultimately on my job “security”. Maybe admitting them on a probationary status might be a better solution than into a remediation program. Labeling a student or a program “remedial” perhaps is an automatic guarantee for failure because of the stigma attached to it. Calling it probationary hopefully implies that the student can and will succeed once they pass successfully. Don’t many jobs have probationary hiring practices that culminate in a 30-60 day review as a prereq to full-status employment? Perhaps colleges should explore this as well.

**rossanne soifer**, at 11:05 am EST on January 19, 2009

College ain’t for everybody. Why do we continue to pretend it is? Students who can’t even pass remedial courses are better off learning a trade. Many skilled laborers earn more than people with bachelor’s degrees.

**IHE Reader**, at 11:05 am EST on January 19, 2009

**Lost Before They Start**
Besides the remedial aspect of preparing students for a community college program we also see many equally struggling with work/life balance including mental health and substance abuse issues. As we all know, the students we are discussing are not traditional college students. They come with a host of issues, married with children, single parents, limited or no support from family, histories of neglect and in some cases abuse, depression, etc. (the list is very long). As we tend to this group with remedial help we also need to be attentive to their day-to-day life circumstances as well. The Wellness Corporation specializes in services for higher education and provides Employee Assistance Program services and Student Assistance programs.

Hank Christiansen, LICSW

Hank Christiansen, Senior Vice President at The Wellness Corporation, at 12:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

academic language

We have found strong correlations between the level of student academic language and course persistence and GPA at all levels of postsecondary education, including at the community college level. Academic language is the language used in textbooks, tests, and lectures, and is distinctly different from the spoken language of most students. For underprepared students, development of academic language, and most particularly, academic vocabulary, is the key to academic success. From our research, we concluded that academic language is, in a sense, a second language for all students, and should be taught directly when students are identified as needing “remediation.” Remediation suggests more of the same that they did not benefit from in high school. Teaching skills to help students access and acquire academic language is a more successful approach. Please see www.academiclanguage.org.

PK, at 12:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Student disposition v. remedial courses and a question

As described the study appears to be based on a faulty premise. However, if there is a normal distribution of disposition among potential remedial students then the percentages reported may reflect an uncomfortable reality. Not all students have both the ability and disposition to benefit from remedial coursework. A strong disposition for success may offset ability deficits. When both ability and disposition lag the path to successful completion of course work has many obstacles. Until we learn more about student disposition these dismay percentages will likely persist.

ps We don’t report the other side of the income statement. While institutions may spend a billion dollars on remedial courses, how much income is earned by these same courses?

William Patrick Leonard, at 12:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

I too have problems with the “remedial” title of these courses. It really disincentivises students from attending college because they have to pay up for courses that don’t count toward a degree. Perhaps this is a failure of our K-12 system, but anyway.

I do agree that you don’t have to go to college, they can learn a trade, but if you look at most jobs the entry level degree is a BA. This perhaps is a failing in our hiring system, but it is the way it is, and people need a BA to get somewhere in life whereas in the past a high school diploma was enough for something like “basic” administrative tasks.

Dr. Pepper, Professor-in-training, at 12:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

remediation

By the time they reach community college, low-performing students are all too familiar with a model of
remediation, beginning in elementary school, that goes something like this:

Teach something within a narrow band of “traditional” teaching methods—lecture, let’s say—that leads to success for some students.

Reward the successful students by giving them “creative” work that engages multiple learning modalities and fosters higher thinking skills.

Remediate the unsuccessful students by giving them more, and more, and more of the teaching and learning strategies that didn’t work in the first place.

When community college students face a sequence of courses that looks depressingly like the K-12 school work they hated, it’s no wonder that they simply bail.

Kathleen, at 12:40 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Motivated; or not...

I agree with the idea of connecting remediation to vocational interests — this should enable many excellent “teachable moments” to occur. However, I think our focus should be more on the individual’s level of motivation, or lack thereof, rather than the institution’s culpability.

If a prospective student is not motivated enough to even begin a process that will help them get from point A to point B, perhaps they are not convinced point B is worth the time and effort (whether because of “intimidation, boredom, or confusion”). Granted, it takes mere seconds to miss the point of an algebraic equation even when explained at the blackboard. However, as demoralizing as that is, and I can verify from personal experience that it is, if it is going to be occupationally important for me to pass this class and earn this degree, then I better be willing to ask for help; and hopefully from someone patient enough to want to help me.

But in the final analysis it begins with “me”. The student has to ask, “Do I want the end result badly enough to invest in the beginning of the process”? Or do I feel too confused, or embarrassed to even try.

And since the very definition of the term “remediation” tells me, “I’ve been here before and it wasn’t pretty”, my level of motivation and whether or not I ask for help, questions of aptitude notwithstanding, will largely determine the outcome, and not as much so, the institutional delivery method.

Look Within, at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Career vs. Transfer

I think my subject title explains a possible solution for reducing the dropout rate. Since most community colleges have an open enrollment policy, problems with remediation will continue indefinitely. I can’t imagine that no one has come up with the solution of pre-enrollment conditions like, “if you are taking a career focused program with no real goals of transferring to a four year institution, you do not need to take any placement testing or remedial courses.” Label their degree as an applied science degree (AAS) vs. the applied science (AS).

If you want to transfer on to a four-year institution, than you must pass the placement test and complete all remedial courses before you can move on.

If you don’t think that academic integrity can withstand it, check out how well the “career” schools are doing. They have similar open enrollment policies and cost many thousands of dollars more than community colleges, but their graduation rates are much higher, their graduates capably function in their chosen fields, and get to work sooner than later. I also just read that the for-profit education sector will see an average stock percentage increase of 15%.

Rick Fox, at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009
College Preparation

We are a college access program for Latina/Latino youth who have many students participating who come to us with 3.5 to 5.0 GPAs and who are clearly not ready for college, particularly in the area of writing. We have developed a writing project within our program in addition to many other areas to provide a holistic approach to helping our students start strong and stay strong in college. We are continually adding to our program and are witness to great success in developing pipelines to institutions across the country with choices for our students. Check us out at www.aguilayouth.org.

Ms. H., CEO/Founder at AGUILA Youth Leadership Inst., at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Developmental Courses

At my community college we call remedial courses “developmental” courses. “Developmental” is an obvious euphemism, but if people think that that will work, then give it a try.

We have a sequence in English and one in mathematics. What I would really like to see from these studies is a distinction made between these sequences and some data addressing that distinction. For instance, some students need developmental work in math but not English. Some are the other way around. Some need both. Some need both, but only the top developmental course in each area.

Of course, if you start with the very weakest students who start at the bottom of both tracks, the completion numbers will be horrible. But what about those on only one track, or those who start near the top of those tracks? We need the numbers on these so that we can evaluate the data.

I do agree with the one reader that not everyone is ready for college, but how do we know who those people are if we don’t give them a shot? As for the suggestion of acquiring a trade, what trade would that be? Construction worker, real estate agent, etc. I don’t think that those trades are doing so well right now. As for careers in computer fields and other technological fields, I believe that reading, writing, and arithmetic will be required.

If the K-12 system continues to churn out students weak in math and English, why should those students be punished by being denied an opportunity at a college education? If the objection, commonly heard, is that remediation is expensive, I would say that we’ve wasted far more money on granite countertops, the war in Iraq, bonuses for disgraced financiers, etc.

Finally, the community college where I teach requires developmental courses if test scores are too low. I love this system because it protects the integrity of the college transfer courses. Students cannot take the vast majority of college transfer course until completing all but the last level of developmental courses. Students who are not ready for college-level work cannot take college-level courses. But when they are ready to do so after completing the required developmental courses, we are there for them.

Eric Brandon, at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009

I agree fully with IHE reader: “College ain’t for everybody.... Students who can’t even pass remedial courses are better off learning a trade. Many skilled laborers earn more than people with bachelor’s degrees.”

Our insistence as educators in believing that every person who arrives at our doorstep (often against their will & better judgment) can be “saved” if only we use the right methods is arrogant, wrong-headed, and self-serving. Those who show (by their performance & actions, e.g. ignoring high school, walking away) little interest in or aptitude for college may be very suited to some other life’s work which requires no college. It is in their best interest to not delay their pursuit of whatever that is. We buy into (& promote) the thinking that the only path to self-respect and worthiness is college, and these kids have had that drummed into their heads for years. Many have no more real inclination to follow this path than I have to be a professional baseball player. Sure, if they had had that inclination and had pursued it from a much earlier
One way to improve the success rates of those who start in developmental courses would be to try harder at the outset to distinguish between students who truly do aspire to get a degree and have for whatever reason simply not attained the skills they need, and those who really have no interest in education beyond what others have imposed on them. I know people will say, “Who are we to make that decision?” We aren’t. But we need to ask the students, and be prepared to hear their response. If they vote with their feet, we should respect that decision. What happens now, almost always, is that once a warm body comes through the door, the thought that we might admit that they do not really want to be here, or that college is not the best thing for them — this is unheard of. That warm body represents a sale, and we’d no sooner let them get away than a used car salesman would. We call this “enrollment management.”

Mark L., at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Let’s get back to the basics — why do we need remedial education? It’s because our K-12 education is so bad at teaching foundational skills, especially in math. During the past several years studies were released indicating that around 50% of remediation classes in two year colleges were for math. Furthermore, in many school districts, classes are being offered to parents on how to “understand” and help their children in elementary math — and here, I always thought the job of teaching academics was the school district’s responsibility. And, just to provide a example of why this is occurring, it’s a sad truth that in WA State at least, parents have had to organize school-wide practices of memorizing basic math facts (add, subtract, multiply, divide) because the schools do not emphasize the need for students to memorize and master these skills. Also, they no longer emphasize or teach the standard math algorithms (borrow/carry for sub/add, and long mult & div) which are necessary for advancing into algebra and higher mathematics. If the majority of students had strong basic skills entering and leaving high school, mass remediation would be moot for the most part.

Lyng, at 1:50 pm EST on January 19, 2009

ESL and writing

Before we deplore the writing — or lack thereof — taught in K-12 programs, we also need to look at their habit of passing students who have serious ESL issues. As a CC instructor in California, I have students who write their papers in their native languages and then run them through Google Translator or other translation programs. This results in a English mess, regardless of how well written it really was. My students’ writing issues are thus compounded by their lack of English language skills.

Is there a simple answer to this? Certainly not. K-12 teachers are overwhelmed with conflicting teaching mandates, and required to cram so much into a single day that I’m surprised that they have time to do anything even remotely resembling writing. As the education budgets get tighter, these problems will only get worse. Mr. Schneck’s developmental approach is terrific, but when assessment means ‘everyone gets an A’, and money is dependent on such shallow ’success’ rates, such programs don’t get much love from administrators.

CC Instructor, at 2:40 pm EST on January 19, 2009

I am concerned that both IHE reader and Mark perhaps formed an opinion without fully reading the article and certainly without reading the research the article cites.

First perhaps many of IHE’s readers do not realize that the learning of a trade most often happens in community colleges these days. Thus, a person must attend college to learn a trade such as health care technician, construction trades, etc. Most of those TRADE certificates or degrees also require some degree of proficiency in college-level courses (Comp. I, etc). This means that even students who are following the advice of these two readers and learning a trade must also take developmental courses while learning that
trade. This research is not merely about finishing a college degree, it is also related to the number of people who are learning trades.

Second, all of the sources of labor and income data that I’ve seen (and as a demographer, I’ve seen a large number) indicate that, for the vast majority of workers, a college degree in any field will help you earn more. This is without even mentioning more intangible benefits such as increased job security and the ability to pass knowledge gained from college on to your children who are then also more likely to attend college. Please do a little real research on this matter or am I to assume that you will be sending your child to learn a trade rather than to college.

Lastly, to all who are mentioning motivation as the real problem rather than processes at the community college level, all of the students examined in this research exhibited a strong degree of motivation just in the process of applying and testing. Am I to understand that you are explaining the lower levels of enrollment and completion among males and African-Americans as lower motivation and lower aptitude in those groups compared with others who tested into the same course levels?

Instead, I would argue that underprepared students are more likely to complete these sequences in four-year institutions because the sequences are shorter. Math material is taught in perhaps two remedial courses rather than four. In addition, I am not sure how true this is of other community college systems, but the score cut-offs forcing students into remedial versus college level courses are MORE stringent than at the university. This forces students into remedial courses who should, instead, be enrolled in college level courses.

Students who are entering college soon after completing high school may simply need a day-long refresher course to pass the placement exam. This type of refresher has proven effective at UTEP and is also proving to save many students a minimum of one semester’s savings in time to degree completion.

interested party, Reading and research skills, at 4:05 pm EST on January 19, 2009

whose responsibility?

K-12 teachers are required to take an extraordinary number of hours to qualify as a teacher in practice and subject. Post secondary faculty just need a content degree. Who is better equipped to deal with problems in student achievement? And why should those content specialists in post secondary be expected to deal with problems that those trained to cover were unable to handle?

One major university threatened to charge the student’s high school for the cost of dealing with unprepared students who were certified as ready by the high school. That was, until, it was suggested that the university be shouldered with the same costs for college graduates who entered the job market unprepared.

The for-profits have a better track record because each student lost is a revenue that must be replaced and the faculty are geared to take this task seriously and are paid for an appropriate job description which takes this into account.

K-14 public schools have no such pressures and maybe such pressures could be a disincentive.

Until the system starting at preK changes its production line age-driven cohort model, the problem is not soluble

tom, think outsie the box, at 5:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

For what it’s worth

The term remedial is arcane. The terms used now are developmental or basic skills.

This article is a good rehash of what we already know and doesn’t provide solutions. One of the chief problems for the students is real-time measurement and feedback. One of the chief problems for the schools is tracking student performance from entry into basic skills courses through their entire student career and
using this information to improve programs and courses.

Jerry Pattengale can you please provide the links to “Lilly” and “Pathways”? Thanks.

Linda Aragoni. When I was in elementary school in the late 60’s, I had a radical teacher who instead of making us read from a reading textbook, supplied us with a variety of magazines and allowed us to read what interested us. We all read willingly. We were also required to write a short report about what we had read.

Admission Counselor: At Modesto Junior College in California, basic skills students are organized into support communities. I recently heard four successful students in their Bridge program talk about the critical importance of being encouraged by their peers, staff, and instructors to continue while they attended school and managed their difficult lives. Their stories were very emotional.

IHE Reader & Dr. Pepper: We are providing students with an opportunity, not an outcome. Skilled laborers need basic skills too, e.g. machinists must be able to do basic math, auto mechanics need to be able to use computers, etc.

Hank Christiansen: You are mostly correct. Most basic skills students have very difficult lives, but some have learning and language disabilities, which I find interesting has not been mentioned in this discussion until now.

PK: Brilliant! Peer instruction is a technique whereby students teach each other the concepts in class. The astute instructor will walk around and listen to the language being used to explain concepts and incorporate it into his/her repertoire.

Kathleen: Too many programs employ outmoded methods of learning. I find it interesting that no one has yet mentioned the use of technology to improve the performance of low performing students, e.g. interactive games, videos, electronic textbooks, drill applications, response systems, presentation applications, interactive whiteboards, the Internet, etc.

Look Within: Several important points. Someone patient enough to help.” I helped my grandniece with her chemistry homework over the weekend. She said her teacher gets huffy when students don’t get it and ask for more explanation. “In the final analysis it begins with ‘me’.” I took a couple of years off from my business activities to teach high school math. I was astonished that NONE of my students had been taught how to be successful students. I developed The Six Characteristics of Successful Students and drilled them nearly every day. If my students learned nothing else from me, they learned what they needed to do to be successful, 1. Pay attention, 2. Take notes, 3. Do your homework/classwork, 4. Ask for help, 5. Study (Review your notes, redo homework/classwork/quiz/test problems), 6. Repeat. Talk about basic skills!

Rick Fox: I am a fan of for-profit education. My nephew is currently attending a Wyo Tech school. However, private schools do not accept everyone and they do have dropouts. This is especially true in the K12 market where for-profit schools cherry pick their students so their success statistics look much better.

Ms. H.: Kudos on your wonderful program! Not sure that I understand the need for the racial component.

Eric Brandon: I agree wholeheartedly that tracking data is one of the keys. Most accreditation organizations now require the systematic measurement of outcomes. I would take that one step further and add a longitudinal component throughout the student’s career either at that school or across schools. In California, www.Cal-Pass.org was organized to begin this process not only within a school, but across the entire state. You might also look at technologies that are designed to capture and track student data in this way. I think your schools approach is sensible.

California has a large percentage of students whose native language is not English. Until these students learn English, it is difficult if not impossible for them to learn other subjects adequately. The second year I taught high school math, I was in the ESOL department. As the year progressed, I was amazed at how much more capable at learning math my students became when they better understood what I was saying. Go figure.
Mark L.: I think too many of us bought into the idea that everyone has equal ability. There are many factors to success including ability, but also motivation, family history, life circumstances, personal behavior, disability, etc. I also agree wholeheartedly that our society labels some careers as being worthy while others are unnecessarily ridiculed. Your last paragraph reminds me to point out that schools are businesses. They have a financial interest in FTEs and they are getting boatloads of money for basic skills courses. I think some students have become discouraged because they have never been successful even though they may indeed have the ability. I have a niece who fits into that category. It is difficult to get her to believe that it is effort that she is lacking and not intelligence.

Ling: I taught math at two different high schools. Admittedly, some teachers were better than others, but the vast majority were very dedicated hardworking people. There are cultural and familial factors that have not been discussed here. The motivation of young students is also affected by the paths they perceive to be open to their ethnic group.

CC Instructor: In Florida, students with language problems were allowed to stay in school longer. I had some twenty year olds in my classes. Another subject not discussed here yet is the effect of standardized testing. Our school suspended curriculum at the beginning of January so that we could teach problem solving until we took the FCAT at the beginning of March. The benefit was that my students became very good at solving math problems, but they did not learn new concepts during that time.

interested party: Well said. I recently saw statistics for California that 70-85% of students who enter the community college system require some form of basic skills improvement in reading, writing, math and/or ESL. I find these numbers daunting.

God speed to all of you!

John B., Education Consultant, at 5:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009

@Lyng

Lyng wrote, “why do we need remedial education? It’s because our K-12 education is so bad at teaching foundational skills, especially in math.”

really? you seem to assume every student would be successful in a postsecondary setting if the k-12 system was just working better. let me ask this. . . do you think every student in America has the potential to become a surgeon? why or why not? i certainly don’t believe everyone has the aptitude to achieve that kind of degree. so that begs the question of whether every student should be able to get a postsecondary degree. perhaps not. at what point do we as a society start to realize that achievement lines may be drawn in the sand? i think everyone should be able to finish high school, but even then i realize that some students with disabilities may need an alternative diploma as many of these individuals have taken an alternative curriculum that does not reflect the standard curriculum offered by the district. we have dropout rates of 30% in high schools. colleges are going to have students who aren’t prepared, sure, but they are also going to get students who may not have the aptitude to succeed. no amount of remediation is going to bring achievement levels up beyond the potential for some folks.

additionally, postsecondary school is a luxury in our society; not an entitlement. i agree with the individual above who noted that it’s not for everyone. not everyone has the potential to succeed in a postsecondary environment.

i think colleges should pay more attention to recruitment, retention, and completion efforts that they employ; however, i also think the purpose of remedial courses is to help students get up to a level where they can take the standard curriculum at the community college, for example. not everyone is going to get there. if we can improve the process then let’s do it, but let us also recognize we’re no longer talking about a required education like the k-12 system.

sean, Associate Professor at Grand Valley State University, at 5:20 pm EST on January 19, 2009
Local Control, loco parents

Anyone who has ever taught in our American K-12 system knows of or has at least heard of incidents where parents blocked the failure of their child.

The social stigma of being “held back” is another reason why many K-12 schools pass along their failures to colleges.

The U.S. needs to discard our assembly line approach to K-12 education; who says a fifteen year-old student must be doing 9th grade math and 9th grade writing?

Some high school students are taking college coursework in 11th or 12th grade, so why can’t an “average” 18 year old individual take 10th grade math, 11th grade English, and college frosh philosophy?

Lost between the lines of other comments — parental support for education. I’ve heard some wing-ding stories about the lack of this in many student’s lives.No parental support, intense teenage relationships, and sometimes a child or two to support? All those issues make education a priority five, six, or lower.

Dr. F. Gump, at 5:45 pm EST on January 19, 2009

It’s not just CC’s and there are other underlying issues

Good work as usual by the CCRT but their research also applies to the non-community colleges. Four (really six and more) year colleges have the same issues.

Been doing quite a bit of search and research into retention over the past decade into all levels of higher ed. Found that under-prepared students are not just under-prepared in coursework and ability. They bring with them numerous psychological and basic college survival skill deficiencies. We usually ignore these leading to students who quit before they start.

Students who will be assigned to remedial/developmental/pre-college/non-credit and/or provisionally courses (choose what euphemism you use) are being told they are “not college material”. Just as they have heard and feared for many years. That assignment labels them as “less than adequate”, a euphemism for loser, failure or whatever term they hear when placed in remedial. We reinforce the self-deprecation by having them pay dollars for no credit thus using up what money they have along with biting into any aid they may have gotten. Thus they often see it as paying for nothing.

They often do not complete registering for the courses even if motivated, do so because they do not understand our system as was pointed out by another comment. We decide they are not college material yet do not help them work their way through the reams of college material they need to complete and follow to get enrolled, registered and official. Anyone see a bit or irony here?

Many who do sign up drop out because they do not have four basic college skills that we know they don’t have which is why we make them go to classes they need to have the skill to complete. These students usually do not have the study and performance, the time management, financial management skills or academic survival and gamesmanship needed to succeed in college. These skills need to be inculcated in the students, at least on a rudimentary level, if “remedial” student have a shot in Hell University College to succeed. But these are also skills “they should have gotten before they came here”.

And. One really basic skill many do not have at a sufficient level is reading. They very well may not do well on a math placement exam because they cannot read the problems. A writing assignment because they can’t read the topic or proofread. A course section booklet needed to figure out what section to take. The paperwork needed to complete some usually repetitious and unnecessary administrative task. And so on.

Yet, everyone of these problems can and has been remedied in schools that actually did something about academic customer service which is really what we are talking about. Like making sure these students do not get lost in the system. Test and place for reading ability even if that meant the placement was out of the
school (WHAT! Every enrollment brings us money so we have to admit students we know we shouldn’t and
don’t bother me with the ethics crap.) We have worked with some colleges have also put a real orientation
in place that takes time to teach students some of the skills they would need even if it cuts into some fun
stuff. It all can be done and we must do it all for every student we admit. If you don’t want to do it, spare
the students and faculty the cost, the pain and the defeat and help the students to a place where they can get
the pre-college help and training.

Neal Raisman, at 5:45 pm EST on January 19, 2009

I don’t see the financial aid situation entering into this discussion at all. The suggestions that involve
classwork outside of the normal semester structure ignore the fact that these are not normally covered by
financial aid.

Anonymous, at 8:35 pm EST on January 19, 2009

Lost Before They Start

I enjoyed the article and the initiatives to look at remedial education as a system and not as individual
courses.

I would challenge the authors not to look at the students as groups, but as individuals in that the way
educational courses and the support for the students are not made to be one size fits all.

The challenges that adults have in going back to school can be enormous (not that institutions need to
address all of these), and it must be said that students need motivation and support to excel. I also caution
against making courses longer, its nice to get a break. An alternative maybe take home assignments that
keeps the student engaged but not overburdened.

J Mosley, Dr., at 9:50 am EST on January 20, 2009

Good Feedback

John B: Good job of providing succinct, positive feedback on many of the postings. It’s obvious why you
are an Education Consultant, you have much to contribute.

Thank You.

P.S. I like your “Six Steps to Success”, especially the first one: Pay Attention. Talk about life Skills, in an
age when so many different streams of information vie for our attention at the same time (self-initiated or
not)- and that of our youthful offspring who drive, this one could actually save their life!

Look Within, at 10:16 am EST on January 20, 2009

Many posts have some good thoughts here, but the problem we all face in every institution is… we have a
significant number of people who want to improve themselves and somewhere along the line failed to “get”
the fundamentals of math, writing etc. We can point fingers, dance around the terminology, but the fact
remains that we must work at fundamental education whole heartedly, not as an add-on or after thought. I
find it rather arrogant to assume that college isn’t for everybody, that some people should be pushed to the
trades, because they can barely solve arithmetic. First of all, anyone who makes a statement like that doesn’t
have a clue about the “trades.” Tradesmen don’t take college algebra and never use it again in their lives as
does a good portion of university grads do. In fact, in most trades, math and reasoning are an everyday
routine inherent in the professions. Ask a machinist how to calculate the cutting depth of a keyway (chord).
Ask an electrician how they calculate Reactive power (Vectors). Ask a control technician what a 2’s
compliment value is. Ask a refrigeration technician to tell you how to apply the Laws of Thermodynamics,
and enthalpy. Ask a PdM mechanic about the properties of infrared. The list goes on…Realize math,
science, reading/writing are equally important, if not more-so to the trades than to any other career. It may
be true that we can’t help everyone to be successful and that our success rate seems to be narrower than
ever. After all, Education is a journey. Where it begins and ends is up to the traveler, not the tour guide…

Bill, at 1:40 pm EST on January 20, 2009

a Student’s comment

I would just like to say that I work full time and I am currently a returning adult part time night and weekend student at Montgomery Community College in Maryland and I am working towards an AA in business taking no more than two classes a semester including homework etc. As a returning adult part time student I met with the counselor/Advisor to go over my college credits there and what I still needed to take for my business degree. I then had to take the remedial two week course ( we met Monday thru Friday evenings for two weeks, for several hours each night) called FASTTRACK ( Pre-Algebra & Algebra)http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/Departments/FastTrack/. Before I took the course I bought an Algebra instruction book from Borders books so I could prepare for the class over the summer before class started. The Professor for the FASTTrack course Christina Lavalle was so knowledgeable and enthusiastic and so were the tutors in the math science center at the college. Montgomery College offers Tutoring in Math and Science for all students as part of their tuition which is really helpful. AFter Passing FASTTRACK I took a 3 credit Course in Intermediate Algebra and Passed with a Grade of C in addition to taking and passing with a C Elementary Applied Calculus the following Summer. At Montgomery College Thus far I have been blessed with some really talented, knowledgeable and enthusiastic Professors and tutors in the tutoring centers at the college, but I also had to work hard on my homework assignments and study hard for tests in addition to my full time professional job/career. It’s not easy but in can be done. I am now taking the required core courses towards my AA degree in Business. My point here is that Students have a responsibility with regard to their success in college, it’s not just about the college itself, course structure, Faculty etc.

Thank you & Sincerely,
Ann Marie Brasile Mejac, College student

Ann Marie Brasile Mejac, at 2:10 pm EST on January 20, 2009

Not Everyone is Ready

As a remedial math instructor I submit that, many students dropping out of remedial sequences, especially those who do not finish the first courses, are simply not ready for college.

I base this on a comparison between my non-traditional students to those coming directly from secondary schools. Those who are older and have spent time in the workforce or military, in general, approach education with greater motivation born of their experience with the world outside academia. The non-traditional students have done advanced coursework in reality. Without this experience and the insight gained, some younger students are simply not ready for college no matter what we’d like to think.

Having said that, open enrollment is the only way to go for a free society. Individual academic success or failure simply cannot be accurately predicted and it must be left up to the individual to invest the necessary effort or not. Of course, we must give every student every chance to succeed and treat them as if they will succeed, but some will refuse all efforts and drop out regardless. For these students we should concentrate on making a later return to the educational system as easy and as painless as possible for, I believe many of them will be back once they realize that without and education one’s economic future is rather dim.

In inappropriate concentration on retention rates, like the No Child Left Behind standardized test scores, can seriously distort our focus and effectiveness as educators.

But then again, retention equals money. Nuf’ said?

Robert Avakain, at 6:35 pm EST on January 20, 2009
A bit of missing context

One issue I have with this paper (the original that is) is that some important context seems to be missing, namely, how many students that DON’T have to remediate complete a sequence?

I’ve been looking at what I call “yield” in our own data, by which I mean what percent of the students we assess end up enrolling. What I’m finding is that there tends to be a fairly linear relationship between a student’s COMPASS Writing and Reading scores and their likelihood of enrolling in program-level courses. So yes, only about 50-60 percent of the lowest-scoring students on COMPASS enroll, but at the top (95-99) we are still looking at about 70-75% of students enrolling. So yes, students scoring lowest are less likely to enroll, but without context we are inclined to compare the 40% figure cited against perfect, 100% enrollment yield, and that’s not what happens.

Furthermore, as always we have to be careful not to equate correlation with causation. I think there is a tendency to see a correlation between more remedial requirements and lower completion rates and assume that the remedial work somehow “discourages” students from finishing. It is equally plausible that students that have a history of failing to see an educational goal through to completion will tend to be those that score poorly on tests of prior academic achievement like COMPASS.

Viktor Brenner, Institutional Research Coordinator at Waukesha County Technical College, at 2:20 pm EST on January 26, 2009

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While I haven’t read all of these observations, my experience confirms Mr. Schenk’s observations. They address the real issues directly and insightfully.

It is in these alleged “remediation” (not my favorite term) courses, and other introductory courses, that our visions of what a college education is all about come into play, and that’s why such courses deserve the best teachers and the optimal teaching conditions and support. Instead, they are often the courses staffed mainly by a contingent workforce which, however dedicated, can become disillusioned.

Without such a deep commitment to such teachers (and their students) our claims to being serious about increasing access to higher education are highly suspect.

George T. Karnezis, at 5:15 am EST on February 6, 2009

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