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Remedial Educators Warn of Misconceptions Fueling a Reform Movement

By Katherine Mangan | JULY 28, 2015

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The way policy makers in some states see it, the biggest obstacles preventing students from completing college are the courses that are supposed to help unprepared students catch up. Remedial education is under siege, and the instructors in the trenches are caught in the crossfire.

In Florida, lawmakers who were fed up with low completion numbers voted to make remedial classes optional for most high-school graduates. Pass rates in some introductory college classes have dipped as more unprepared students flock to credit-bearing classes.

In Connecticut, students are now limited to a single semester of remedial classes, and across the nation, a growing number of states are heeding a call from the nonprofit group Complete College America to make college-level classes the default placement for nearly all students. Students who need extra help can get it in one or two semesters alongside credit-bearing classes under a co-requisite approach that is gaining popularity.

But as remedial reform sweeps the nation, developmental-education experts are raising alarms about unintended consequences. They say the reform movement has taken off with too little research and input from educators who know best.

Last week leaders of the National Association for Developmental Education, which has about 3,000 members in 50 states, discussed those concerns during a professional-development program held here on the campus of Appalachian State University, where the National Center for Developmental Education is located.

Here, according to those leaders, are five misconceptions about developmental education in the nation's open-access community colleges.

1. If you graduated from high school, you're ready for college-level classes. Nearly 70 percent of the students entering community colleges are assigned to remedial coursework, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. Many of those students could probably do just fine if they took college-level classes, researchers there have concluded, and most developmental educators agree.

But what about the thousands of students who are way below the cutoff score on placement tests? Maybe they've been out of college for a decade or more, and they've forgotten their algebra. Or they graduated from a school where pressure to pass more students prompted administrators to lower graduation standards. There's often a wide gap between the requirements to graduate from high school and what's needed to succeed even at an open-access community college. It's a gap that colleges and high schools are trying to bridge through early-college high schools, remedial mathematics in high school, and early testing for college readiness.

But as long as that gap remains, thousands of students who graduate from high school are going to face the frustrating realization that their high-school diploma isn't enough to assure that they're ready to take on college-level classes.

Even among 57 percent of graduating students who took the ACT college-readiness tests, many struggled. A report released by ACT found that only 39 percent of the 2014 graduating seniors who took the test met at least three of the benchmarks for English, reading, math, and science. Those are the students, the report says, that have a "strong likelihood" of succeeding in first-year college courses.

2. Developmental education is the same thing as taking remedial classes. Catch-up, or remedial, classes are one component of a broader approach that includes tutoring, time management, study skills, and other supports.

"Developmental education is about treating students holistically and realizing that they're not just students taking courses but people who are parenting and working, many of whom are struggling to manage their finances and their time," says Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education.

"The focus of many of the remedial-reform efforts appears to be on getting students through courses as quickly and cheaply as possible," he adds, and that often requires a heavy reliance on online support courses where minority and underprepared students are more likely to struggle.

3. Eliminating remedial-course requirements will help more students graduate. Early evidence from Florida indicates that students who are given the option to skip remedial classes will do so, and that many unprepared students who jump into college-level classes will struggle.

"The mission of developmental education is to give students the skills they need to succeed in their first college courses," says D. Patrick Saxon, an associate professor of educational leadership at Sam Houston State University, in Texas. "When you take away those supports, you're essentially returning to the revolving door of the 1960s, when anyone could attend college, but once there, it was sink or swim."

4. Co-requisite remediation will work for nearly everyone needing extra help. That's a message that Stan Jones, president of Complete College America, sought to convey at the meeting here and in an interview this week.

"The evidence is pretty overwhelming, as we scale across states, that even at the lowest levels, students perform better in co-requisite courses than if they had been in traditional stand-alone remediation," he says. His nonprofit group, which is heavily supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has been pushing states to carry out its "game-changing" strategies, including co-requisite remediation, performance-based funding, and highly structured schedules.

About 30 percent of the students who place into a remedial class never show up for it, Mr. Jones contends, often because they're embarrassed or frustrated. He'd favor eliminating all stand-alone remedial classes as long as options like an intensive boot camp right before classes start, co-requisite remediation, and math requirements that are tied to what students actually need are in place.

Robin Ozz, the association's president-elect, is director of developmental education at Phoenix College, a community college in Arizona. She's been teaching co-requisite classes for seven years, and says the approach works well for many, but not so well for those with the greatest needs.

"These students get all excited thinking they'll be able to finish their college class in one semester," she says, "but then some struggle and drop out, which is terrible on their self-esteem."

5. Remedial educators resist change. Rebecca Goosen, associate vice chancellor for college preparatory at San Jacinto College, in Texas, doesn't buy that.

"I have found that developmental educators are the most innovative and adaptable faculty that respond to mandates," she says. In addition, "they are the first to initiate and adopt practices that improve student success and are the closest to understanding the needs and ability of students they serve."

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