

## **Developmental Education: A Barrier to a Postsecondary Credential for Millions of Americans**

*MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.*

**Bottom Line:** Community colleges across the country confront a clear challenge: too many students arrive on campus unprepared, get placed into developmental (or remedial) courses where they fail to progress, and never complete a credential, graduate, or transfer to a four-year institution. At the same time, community colleges are subject to increasing expectations — and increased scrutiny — about their capacity to prepare workers for a global economy. Community colleges have implemented a variety of reforms in developmental education in recent years. While research shows modest effects for some of these efforts, it is increasingly clear that bolder change — and more evidence of what works — is needed to substantially improve completion rates for the hundreds of thousands of college students who are placed in remedial education each year.

### **What Do We Know?**

**Community college enrollment has increased, but degree completion rates remain low partly because many students do not start or complete the developmental education sequence.** Community colleges play an increasingly vital role in postsecondary education, now enrolling 40 percent of all college students. But at most only one in three earn a certificate or degree within five years. Nearly 60 percent arrive academically unprepared and enroll in at least one developmental reading, writing, or math course. Some face as many as four courses of remedial math or English before even attempting a college-level course. Most never make it that far.

**Developmental education needs to be reformed.** The goal of developmental education is to build up the basic skills in English and mathematics of academically unprepared students so that they are successful in college-level work. Rigorous evaluations suggest three major conclusions about reform efforts:

- **Short-term, focused reforms tend to have modest effects that fade within a semester or two.** One common approach is a learning community, in which cohorts of students co-enroll in developmental courses linked with college-level courses. Single-semester learning communities have produced modest, positive effects on the number of developmental credits earned by students during the program semester, but the effects tend to diminish within one year. When enhancements, such as tutoring, advising, and book vouchers are added, learning communities *can* lead to higher graduation rates but mostly for students who are already college-ready. Similarly, summer bridge programs, which give high school seniors a last-minute opportunity to brush up their skills before taking college placement tests, have generated higher pass rates in college-level math courses, but the effects also fade within a year.
- **Comprehensive reforms may lead to more sustained effects than approaches that address only one or two obstacles facing students. However, these programs are more costly and difficult to scale up.** For example, preliminary analysis of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY), an unusually multifaceted program that provides an array support services and incentives designed to help developmental education students graduate, shows that it increased the proportion of students who completed their developmental coursework by the end of the first semester.

- **Programs that accelerate students through developmental education hold promise.** For example, the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County placed developmental English students into mainstream college-level English courses while enrolling them in a companion course in which the same instructor provided additional guidance. Students participating in ALP were more likely to take and pass the first two college-level English courses, compared with students who enrolled in developmental courses.

## What's Next?

**Implement comprehensive reform strategies at community colleges.** To dramatically increase completion rates, comprehensive, long-term reform strategies that address all aspects of a community college student's experience are needed. For example, Completion by Design is a program that aims to help colleges implement structured and systematic changes — from entry to completion — to provide students with the most efficient and direct path to a degree. Achieving the Dream is another example of a large-scale initiative program that tries to change the institutional culture of colleges by helping them collect and analyze student performance data, which can inform system-wide reform strategies.

**Improving curriculum and assessment alignment between secondary and postsecondary education.** One way to reduce the need for developmental education is to increase the number of students who arrive at college prepared to do college-level work. The Common Core Standards, which are establishing career- and college-ready standards for high school curricula, are a promising approach to better align these two education systems. Another way to ensure that high school students are college-ready is to test their skills with the same assessment instruments that are used to place them in developmental education courses when they enroll in college. For instance, Florida recently introduced a new college entrance assessment that is aligned with both the Common Core Standards and new standards set by colleges. Traditional college placement tests have limited value in assessing college readiness. Cutoff points vary dramatically across colleges, and many students who don't make the cut score are capable of tackling college-level courses. Multi-method assessments, including assessments of non-cognitive skills like problem-solving and time management, may work better but are rarely used.

**Getting inside the "black box" of developmental education instruction.** Little is known about what really goes on in developmental education classrooms, and even less is known about the attributes of effective teaching for this population. Principles of adult learning are often poorly understood by developmental education instructors, who are typically not offered professional development opportunities by their employers. Evidence-based instructional strategies used in high schools could be readily adapted for community colleges. Professional development for instructors and curricular reforms may be needed.

**Speeding up innovation on acceleration strategies.** Many colleges are experimenting with ways to accelerate students through developmental education sequences by compressing the course sequences, dividing semester-long courses into self-paced modules, using educational technology, and mainstreaming students with developmental needs in regular college courses (usually with additional help). For instance, Virginia is implementing modularization approaches in math and English statewide. However, little is known about the effectiveness of these increasingly popular programs.

Community colleges are some of the institutions that are best positioned to prepare the American workforce for the global economy while offering low-income individuals a chance at earning a postsecondary credential. But unless community colleges can become as effective in ensuring high completion rates as they are at ensuring access, future generations may be condemned to low-skill, low-wage jobs. The health of the American economy depends on the ability of these institutions to produce young people who can compete and thrive in a knowledge-based global economy.