

Challenges for Community Colleges

Two recently released California reports underscore the attention currently focused on the role of community colleges in achieving the national goal of raising the proportion of college graduates and in ensuring that reaching that goal is possible for those in our society who find it most difficult to do so. In a 2010 report by EdSource, it is made clear that “something’s got to give,” when it comes to improving college completion rates, and in particular, with regard to developmental education at community colleges (EdSource, October 2010). The report lays out the challenges and opportunities related to developmental education, and it is clear that these are not unique to community colleges in California. The Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy produced “Divided We Fail” focused on the improvement of completion rates and closing racial gaps. The authors note, “Six years after enrolling, 70% of degree-seeking students had not completed a certificate or degree and had not transferred to a university (about 75% of black students and 80% of Latinos). Most had dropped out; only 15% of the non-completers were still enrolled” (Moore & Shulock, October 2010).

Remedial Education

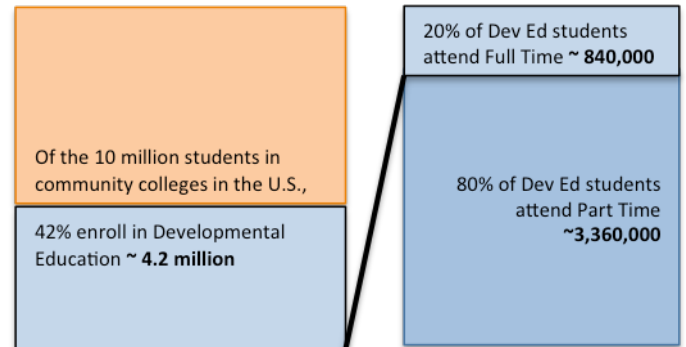
As research progresses on the state of remedial education in the U.S., researchers and educators are gaining a greater awareness of the deficiencies of current remedial education models. Remedial courses are underfunded, separated from mainstream courses, taught by part-time faculty, and otherwise marginalized by the institutions offering them (Grubb, 2001). The majority of programs often fail to take into account the diversity of the student population requiring remediation. Students may test at the same level but come from a variety of backgrounds, including students who may require only one remedial education course, students with severe learning disabilities, and adults returning to education after a prolonged absence (Levin, 2008). Such students have varying academic skills and needs, yet the majority of remedial education programs follow the typical teacher-centered “skills and drills” format, characterized by overly simplified and repetitive tasks and low student engagement. Students do not develop relationships with their peers, and thus are not learning resources for one another (Grubb, 2001). The sequential design of many remedial education programs, where students must pass through a series of remedial courses before entering college credit bearing courses, is an additional obstacle for underprepared students (Bailey et al., 2009).

[There is] a national consensus that the current system of developmental education is not producing the results it should for the investment being made by the state, by local campuses, and by students themselves. [It is also] clear that the larger national objective of increasing college completions cannot be attained unless more community college students successfully reach the point of where they can do college-level work.

—EdSource, 2010

The number of underprepared students entering the nation’s community colleges every year is substantial. A large amount of resources are being spent on remedial education programs that seem to be ineffective and do little to inspire students to pursue further education.

From ACE Strategic Plan, 2010



Source: FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2010

The Urgent Need

The urgency to find models that will work better than traditional development education programs is well documented. Data from the most recent National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) indicated that approximately 44% of students enrolled in public two-year institutions during the 2007-08 academic year had taken at

least one remedial course after graduating from high school.¹ The cost of providing this remediation is considerable. A recent analysis estimates the cost of remediation for students through tuition and fees at public two-year institutions to be roughly \$510-\$640 million. In addition,

subsidies for providing remedial education at two-year public institutions through state appropriations and other sources are estimated to be between \$1.4-\$1.7 billion.² Despite the amount states spend on providing remedial education to underprepared students, there have been few studies evaluating remedial education programs. Often, such studies conclude with mixed results on the effectiveness of such programs and do not explain why a particular remediation program works (Bailey, 2009; Levin, 2008; Grubb, 2001). The Academy for College Excellence provides proven, effective, and sustainable solutions to these challenges.

¹ National Center for Educational Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2008 <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas>.

² Strong American Schools, 2008.