

Policies and Curriculums: Remediation Methods in English Instruction at America's Community Colleges

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ABSTRACT

College and career readiness is a focal area within the United States for student achievement within the context of global competitiveness. Despite recent efforts to focus on the college and career readiness of America's students, national data has proven that many students are not prepared for college and need remedial intervention upon entrance into college. This discussion focuses on efforts at community colleges, specifically in the area of literacy, as they work to increase student retention and student success. Recent methods include developmental courses, co-requisite models, and statewide initiatives to determine how to best meet students' academic needs, while considering faculty voice and cost efficiency. Community colleges can serve as grounds to determine how various models of remediation work to ensure that college students can be served in the best capacity for their academic needs, excel in their programs of choice, and in turn, be competitive global citizens.

Keywords: College and Career Readiness, Remedial Education, Community Colleges, Literacy

College and career readiness has been one of the main focus areas for national educational outcomes in the United States, specifically within the last ten years (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2019). National legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act and state efforts such as

the Common Core State Standards Initiative detail frameworks to assist states with preparing their students for their next stage of life after high school, whether college or a career. These frameworks focus on a holistic approach to readiness including the development of academic skills, social-emotional learning, as well as employability skills (American Institutes for Research, 2019). Specifically, the Common Core State Standards were created to prepare students in Kindergarten through 12th grade to be more prepared for college and the workforce (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020). These efforts stemmed from a need for American competitiveness on a global scale.

Despite recent efforts to focus on the college and career readiness of America's students, national data have demonstrated that only about a third of high school seniors are prepared for coursework in college in the areas of math and reading (Camera, 2016). In 2015, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) published data which showed that the college preparedness gap was widening between the highest and lowest performing students (Camera, 2016). NAEP data also showed a national graduation rate of 82%, which implies that some students are graduating without being ready to perform well in college (Kamenetz, 2016). Due to lower levels of college readiness, colleges across the country are working to provide quality interventional services for students who are behind academically. The focus of this discussion is to explore current research on policies governing methods of alternative course delivery at community colleges for students who need remediation in the area of English, specifically, upon entrance into college. The discussion will also present recommendations to meet the needs of students who need academic interventions.

College Attendance after High School

In recent years, students across the country have chosen to continue their education at community colleges. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) reported in the school year 2013-2014, 42% of undergraduate students in the country enrolled in community colleges, and 46% of all students who completed an undergraduate degree had enrolled in a community college during their educational tenure (Ma & Baum, 2016). These institutions generally offer an open admissions policy and lower tuition costs. Recognizing the cheaper cost alternative and economic convenience for students, many states across the country, such as California, Delaware, and Tennessee are offering community college attendance tuition-free for qualifying students (Farrington, 2020). Although students are attending community colleges, national retention rates demonstrate that many students do not complete their degree or certificate programs (Ma & Baum, 2016). The lack of completion is due to a variety of factors involved in a student's college experience.

Academic Preparedness

One factor which influences college completeness is academic preparedness. For incoming students, many institutions of higher learning rely on placement tests to determine the need for remedial coursework mainly in the areas of English, Reading, and Math. Some incoming freshmen are required to enroll in three or four courses within a developmental area (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2014). Additionally, about half of all college students and 70% of students who entered community colleges were required to take at least one remedial course at college entry (Scott-Clayton, 2018). Studies have shown that students who complete their remedial coursework are more likely to stay in college and graduate (NCES, 2016). These completion rates are likely a result of remedial courses strengthening students' literacy skills. When students are confident in their academic abilities, they are more likely to complete their coursework thus demonstrating how remedial coursework is effective in providing necessary skills for students once enrolled in mainstream courses.

Developmental Courses

Remedial or developmental courses improve college completion rates for students who are underprepared for college (Kane et al., 2020; Bio & Korey-Smith, 2018). Although remedial education has academic benefits, critics of the courses argue that they are expensive, costing students nearly 1.3 billion dollars annually (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016). With college costs at alarming rates, additional costs for remedial courses can deter students from continuing their coursework. Also, low student attendance and withdrawals have been reported within remedial courses since the courses often do not provide credit toward degree completion. The rate of return on their investment is low due to the lack of credit-bearing remedial courses. The discrepancy between costs and credits causes students to experience debt since often times, federal and state grants do not provide full costs for remedial coursework (Hauptman, 2019).

Specifically, for developmental writing, Barhoum (2017) explained that course pathways are lengthy, students lack individual support, and course curriculums offer non-relevant assignments. Likewise, Relles and Duncheon (2018) found that instructors of developmental writing courses were often pressured by time for quality instruction and had large class sizes which made it difficult to meet the needs of particular students. As a result of these learning conditions, deficit thinking was reinforced with blame on the students in remediation rather than a focus on how to improve the learning environment (Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubiaga, 2009; Relles & Duncheon, 2018). As in mainstream classes, students in developmental writing courses need continuous encouragement to succeed in their studies, meaning that instructors must work to challenge the deficit approach to the learning environment.

Also, some developmental English courses focus heavily on grammar and lower-order sentence concerns rather than critical reading and writing skills that are essential to success in mainstream English courses and courses in other disciplines. This heavy focus on grammar can hinder students from developing their critical thinking skills which are necessary for reading comprehension and writing. Concerning funding of programming, institutional resources serve as a critical component to the experience of remedial students in developmental writing. However, community colleges are the sector of higher education in the U.S. with the least available funding to implement support to assist students in developmental courses (Callahan & Chumney, 2009). Therefore, an increase of funding is essential to effectively meet the academic needs of students who would benefit from developmental courses.

Increasing Retention and Student Success

To improve learning conditions for students who need developmental education, some states have allowed students to bypass developmental courses. California ended its required remedial courses in its community college system in 2018, while Florida made remedial courses option in 2014 (Barshay, 2014). Other states' community college systems have worked to create new approaches to assessment, placement, and coursework. Considering assessment, many community colleges use the national placement test of ACCUPLACER to determine the courses in which students should enroll. ACCUPLACER is administered by the College Board to "help colleges assess student readiness for introductory credit-bearing courses and make reliable placement decisions" (College Board, 2020). The ACCUPLACER exam is an effort to provide an equitable opportunity for students to attend college through placement.

Although the assessment is used at colleges nationwide, a study by the Community College Research Center found that placement tests do not yield strong predictions of how students will perform in college (Community College Research Center, 2012). In contrast, the same study found that a student's high school grade point average was more useful in predicting a student's college performance and their college grade point average (Community College Research Center, 2012). Also, some studies have found that placement exams have measurement error as some students are "underplaced" in developmental courses, meaning they should have been placed in a mainstream course, and others are "overplaced" in a college-level course, meaning they needed to be placed in a developmental course (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Due to recent studies on the effectiveness of placement testing, the consideration of high school grade point average, along with factors such as cost and credits, alternative approaches are being initiated. Instead of assigning placement tests as the sole measurement of readiness, other methods are yielding positive

outcomes including multiple measures for assessing readiness, accelerated developmental courses, high school partnerships, improved preparation for placement tests, and corequisite courses.

Implementation of Alternative Placement Models

Community colleges across the nation are implementing alternative placement methods for students to improve the efficiency of developmental courses. For example, the University of Hawaii's Community College system scaled developmental English courses to increase the number of students entering into mainstream English courses by using the co-requisite model (Bio & Korey-Smith, 2018). With the co-requisite model, the developmental course is taken at the same time as the mainstream English course. This model saves time and money for students as they simultaneously take the necessary courses. The University of Hawaii's Community College system saw an increase in student achievement in mainstream English course completion rates with an increase in percentage from 37% to 54% (Bio & Korey-Smith, 2018). They also had 1,000 fewer students enrolled in remedial courses in 2016 when they introduced the new placement model than in 2013. Likewise, Schrynemakers et al. (2019) studied policies at three urban community colleges which provided three tracks for students entering into college: replacing traditional, semester-long developmental education courses with immersion programs and co-requisite courses, using high school grade point average instead of standardized examinations, adopting multiple assessment protocols for exit-from-remediation in place of high stakes testing. Furthermore, in the state of Texas, Governor Greg Abbott signed into law in 2017 the corequisite model as a requirement for students enrolled in developmental education courses (Smith, 2017). 54% of the state's students at community colleges take developmental education courses, and students have shown significant increases in passing mainstream courses in math, writing, and reading (Smith, 2017). These models demonstrate that the co-requisite model has proven not only to be efficient, but also yields academic success for students.

Current Statewide Initiatives

As of 2020, a current statewide initiative to increase the gateway momentum is in North Carolina. The state has implemented the RISE program (Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence) to reduce the number of students in remedial courses (Hui, 2019). The goals of RISE are as follows: "properly place students into gateway level courses with or without mandated corequisite supports, elimination of a placement test, and raising the GPA criteria from 2.6 to 2.8" (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2020). Under the policy, if students have graduated in the last 10 years from high school and have an unweighted grade point average of 2.8

or if they have an associate degree, they can enroll in college level math and English. If the students have a 2.2 or 2.799 GPA and their ACT or SAT score is high enough to meet the criteria, they can enroll in college-level math and English, but if their ACT or SAT score is not high enough, they will be placed in a corequisite course. Lastly, if the student has been out of school for 10 years, homeschooled, or has a General Education Diploma (GED), they will have to take the placement test (Hui, 2019).

The policy was tested in 2019 at 14 community colleges in the state and was shown to save time, money, and frustration for students (Newsom, 2019). Also, fewer newly enrolled students had to sit for placement tests and were expending fewer dollars on courses outside of their program of study. The pilot study also found that the co-requisite courses helped students with academic skills they had forgotten or never learned (Newsom, 2019). In addition, students learned success skills, growth mindset activities, and soft skills. In the 2020-2021 academic school year, the state will implement the policy in 58 of its community colleges to allow students to move quickly to complete their English credentials, finish their English course on their first try, and become less discouraged and therefore, more likely to continue attending college (Hui, 2019). It will be beneficial for this statewide initiative in North Carolina to deliver similar results as those in Texas. As shown by the models, students perform well when they are able to be included within the mainstream learning environment with additional support instead of isolated by their remedial courses.

Concerns for Reform

Although new models of providing developmental education are yielding signs of student success, there are some concerns about the effectiveness of the instruction. Some claim that the reforms are moving too fast and are setting students up for failure (Daugherty, 2018; Goudas & Boylan, 2012). Additionally, the one-size-fits all policy approach that accelerates students into mainstream courses could leave some students without the proper foundation of English and mathematics skills (Daugherty, 2018). Also, top down mandates without sufficient engagement from faculty could create a combative atmosphere (Daugherty, 2018). Therefore, curriculum designers must work to ensure that students are receiving the proper supplemental instruction that developmental coursework delivers through careful selection of course materials and emphasis on instructional methods that meet goals and outcomes which align hand-in-hand with the mainstream English course curriculum.

Furthermore, in the area of costs, gateway courses are more effective, but have caused concern about the extra cost of implementation. A 2013-2014 pilot study in Tennessee was conducted at 13 community colleges which implemented corequisite remediation for math, writing, and reading (Belfield, Davis-Jenkins, & Lahr, 2016). While students did make

successful academic gains, the cost for each student in the co-requisite course was subject to be higher than the per-student cost in a mainstream course (Belfield, Davis-Jenkins, & Lahr, 2016). This is due to smaller sections, more counseling, and the use of more faculty under the corequisite model. The efficiency of the new models in the areas of administration and costs are of concern as students are making academic gains.

Faculty Voice

Measuring efficiency also involves the level of input provided by faculty who are in the midst of the implementation of the alternative models of providing developmental education reforms. Research has shown that faculty's voices are often left out of the decision-making process concerning these alternative models. Schrynemakers et al. (2019) sought to gather faculty's voices concerning the implementation of developmental courses in the area of college writing. Faculty at three urban community colleges noted that students were currently less college ready than five years ago thus deeming that college-level reading and writing skills were essential for students to achieve academic success (Schrynemakers et al., 2019). They were also concerned that students were advancing rather quickly to credit-bearing courses without the foundational reading and writing skills needed for those courses. Additionally, faculty expressed three major themes concerning developmental courses: the need for higher academic standards, more classroom-based solutions, and improved support services. They recommended the need for more writing-based tests, reading across the curriculum, and more writing-intensive courses for all students (Schrynemakers et al., 2019). Faculty development is necessary for the delivery of effective instruction in developmental courses for academic gains as well as for an increase in cultural competencies. Professional development can be provided through monthly webinars, access to instructional content, and through collaborative methods for faculty to share ideas concerning pedagogies that have been effective in the classroom both academically and culturally. It is also essential for faculty of developmental courses to continuously communicate with faculty of mainstream courses for an alignment of course instruction.

Student Supports

As students embark into colleges that have various forms of placement, those who may need remediation will need guidance and support when choosing a route, if they have a choice, and when enrolled in the developmental courses. Woods et al. (2018) advocates for college advisors to assist students by reviewing their high school academic performance to determine which courses will facilitate student success once in college. The researchers' findings align with other research in the field which supports the notion that advisors utilize multiple indicators such as course grades and

non-cognitive factors to determine if students will be successful in the mainstream college courses (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Woods et al., 2018). According to Woods et al. (2018), the most prepared students in high school have an 86.2% likelihood of passing mainstream college English courses which indicates that highly prepared students also struggle with concepts in these courses. Therefore, the researchers suggest that advisors talk with students about on-campus supports such as tutoring, while also suggesting that students take a refresher course or corequisite course for assistance (Woods et al., 2018). This method allows students to still receive the foundational instruction to support them in their mainstream college courses.

Furthermore, students who are enrolled in developmental courses including corequisite supplemental courses should receive additional assistance with their coursework. Bodnar and Petrucelli (2016) found that collaborations between campus writing centers and developmental English courses increased students' self-confidence in their writing. During the course of the study, there was a leap in visits to the writing center as students were making recurring visits during and after the semester in which they were enrolled in the developmental course, correlating to an increase of students' self-confidence in their writing (Bodnar & Petrucelli, 2016). Tutoring centers, online tutoring, and advising sessions have also proven to help increase student achievement in corequisite courses. Also, some faculty have expressed the need for embedded tutors in corequisite courses (Schrynemakers et al., 2019). Since these academic supports are available for students, instructors of developmental education should advise their students to utilize the resources as a part of the course requirements. Additionally, embedding instructional faculty from tutoring centers, the library, or other academic supports on campus can enable these faculty to work alongside the instructor to tailor the resources to align with the instruction taught in the class. The partnership between academic supports and classroom instruction can assist students with understanding the comprehensive nature as they seek resources from supports across the campus.

Closing the Gap: Student Achievement in College Literacy

Ensuring that America's students receive the best education is an ultimate goal of reforms within conversations surrounding the topic of developmental education. Specifically, for literacy, when students gain the necessary reading, writing, and critical thinking skills they need, they will be able to not only excel in their college courses, but also as they journey throughout life. As demonstrated in the literature, there are ongoing transitions in policy and curriculum to serve the diverse needs of diverse students.

A gap in the literature is how high schools can assist with preparing students for college-level English courses and how dual enrollment courses could be used as a precursor form of co-requisite courses that students can take before entering college. Instead of dual enrollment courses mainly serving students who are prepared for college-level English, they could be used for students who may need extra assistance before entering college. High school students can take dual enrollment developmental courses during their senior year to receive the foundational skillsets they will need when they enroll in mainstream college courses. This method can save time and money, and better prepare students for their transition into college.

As more states determine the best practices for serving students who need remediation, more research will need to be conducted to determine best practices in the areas of academic achievement, student retention, faculty perception, cost efficiency, and the effectiveness of support services. Community colleges can serve as grounds for the nation to determine how various models of remediation can work to ensure that our nation's college students can arrive with needs, be served in the best capacity for those needs, excel in their programs of choice, and in turn, be competitive global citizens.

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