

RETURN ON INVESTMENT:
Strategies for Improving Remedial Education

OVERVIEW

Every year millions of students enroll in colleges with the goal of completing a college degree or certificate so they can find a well-paying job. Unfortunately, many arrive on college campuses, take a college placement exam and discover they will need to complete remedial education courses in math, reading, or writing that won't count toward a college degree. The courses drain their financial resources and increase the time it will take them to earn a college credential. For many students, remedial education ends up being a road out of college instead of a pathway in.

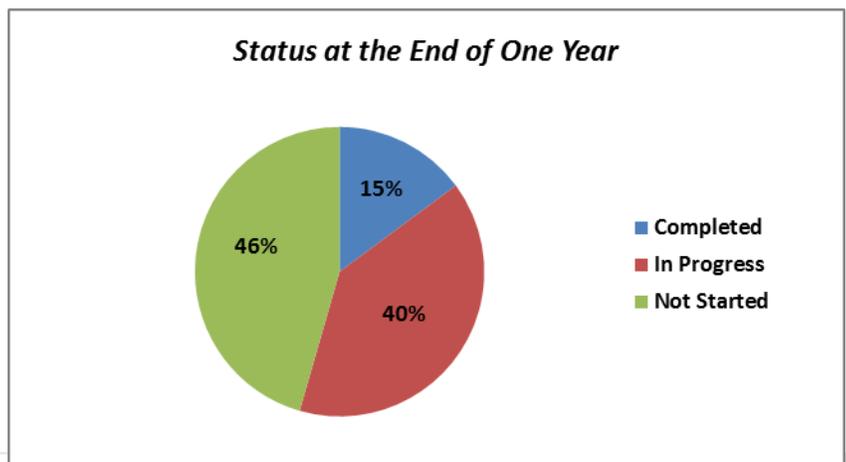
Several factors indicate that new approaches to remedial education are in order:

- Recent data suggest that as many as 40 percent of all students entering postsecondary education will require at least one remedial course. At community colleges, upwards of 60 percent of all new entering students require remedial instruction;
- A low percentage of students who require remedial education ever earn a college credential. According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 17 percent of high school graduates who require at least one remedial reading course and 27 percent who require a remedial math course earn a bachelor's degree. The Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University has found that among community college students only 25 percent who enroll in remedial education complete an associate degree in eight years;
- A primary reason for the low college completion rates of remedial education students is that few ever complete their remedial education courses. For new entering community college students, only 15 percent of those placed in remedial education completed their remedial education sequence in one academic year, 40 percent partially completed their sequence, and 46 percent did not begin their sequence at all in one year (Figure 1); and
- High participation rates in remedial education translate into high costs for students and postsecondary institutions. An analysis done by Strong American Schools estimated that remedial education costs states and students up to \$2.3 billion annually.

At the same time, however, states face challenges in several areas as they seek to overhaul remedial education, including:

Incomplete Data. Very few states gather comprehensive data on who is enrolled in remedial education, how well they perform and how much it costs. In many cases, data is only reported on recent high school graduates, leaving out the large

Figure 1: Students in Remedial Education¹



¹ *Achieving the Dream.*

number of adults who require remediation. Many states do not track how remedial students perform in their remedial or college-level courses and whether they earn a college credential. States should assess the return on their investment in remedial education by fully understanding how effectively and efficiently it moves students through remedial education and onto a college credential.

Imprecise Placement Tools. Many college placement assessments do not precisely pinpoint student academic deficiencies. As a result, many students are required to enroll in remedial courses that cover a broad range of content, much of which students have already mastered. When compounded over multiple semesters of remedial instruction, students waste valuable time and resources that impede their progress to a credential. With better diagnostic assessments, colleges could customize instruction so that students focus on the content they need, accelerating student completion of remedial education and facilitating college completion.

Lack of Widespread Instructional Innovation. Cutting edge instructional technologies and innovative teaching strategies have proven to increase student success in less time and with fewer resources. Unfortunately, these innovations are isolated to individual campuses and instructors, never moving to a scale that meets the needs of the thousands of students who would benefit from them. States should consider ways to encourage colleges to implement these new strategies.

Lack of Integration with State Policy and Planning. Few states have incorporated success in remedial education in their master plans for higher education. As a result, there are no agreed-upon performance measures that help policy makers assess the return on their investment in remedial education. In addition, few states provide any incentives to postsecondary institutions to implement innovative ways to increase student success in remedial education at manageable costs. If states could recognize the role that remedial education can play in state higher education plans to increase college completion and provide incentives to innovate, institutions would move more quickly to adopt proven, cost effective strategies.

IN THE STATES

A number of states are taking concrete steps to improve the return on their remedial education investment, including:

Collecting and Reporting Data on Student Participation in Remedial Education, Student Success and Instructional Costs. The University of [Hawaii](#)'s community colleges collect and report comprehensive data on their remedial education enterprise to include detailed information on who enrolls in remedial courses, how well they perform in their remedial and college level courses, and whether they earn a credential. The reports also track the cost of instruction for reading, writing, and math. The result is a clear and comprehensive view of the state's return on its investment in remedial education.

Ensuring the College Readiness of High School Graduates through Early Assessments and Interventions. The Common Core State Standards should help states fully align high school graduation standards to college entrance requirements. In addition, many states have taken the practical step of asking postsecondary institutions to collaborate with high schools in administering college placement exams to high school students. Results help schools to identify areas of academic

deficiency and to prescribe opportunities for students that address deficiencies while they are still in high school.

Both **Florida** and **California** have implemented early assessment and intervention strategies. The Early Assessment Program (EAP) allows students in California to be assessed for college readiness using their 11th-grade state standardized assessment. In Florida, high school students can take the state college placement assessment in high school to determine college readiness. In both states, students who score below college level can enroll in high school courses that will allow them to address their remedial needs and then enter college academically ready.

Adopting More Precise Assessment and Placement Strategies. In **Tennessee**, students who score below college-level on the ACT college entrance exam must take a secondary diagnostic exam to more precisely identify academic deficiencies. The results enable colleges to customize instruction, and in cases where students test just below college-level, these data can help students avoid remedial education completely by enrolling in college-level courses with additional academic support. Tennessee's focus on use of these secondary diagnostic exam results has increased student success in college level courses, reduced time to degree, and cut costs.

Implementing Innovative Instruction Models. **Washington's** Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program has partnered with adult basic education providers to deliver remedial instruction to students with significant academic deficiencies within career certificate program courses. Students address their deficiencies within a specific occupational program, resulting in customized instruction that has significantly increased certificate completion.

Tennessee's new remedial education policy requires all community colleges to use proven, technology based delivery models to redesign instruction. Among the models that colleges will adopt is Cleveland State Community College's "Do the Math" program. The program teaches remedial math and entry level college math in computer lab settings where students interact with "smart" software that adapts content to focus on students' precise academic deficiencies. Faculty provides one-on-one instruction, and students can move as fast as they like through the curriculum, with many students completing multiple levels of remedial instruction in a semester. The program has increased student success and cut costs, earning it national recognition.

Increasing Institutional Accountability and Facilitating Continuous Improvement. **Washington** and **Ohio** have incentives in their higher education performance funding models that reward institutions for moving students through remedial education quickly and increasing their success in college-level courses. **California** has appropriated resources to community colleges that encourage them to adopt new remedial instruction approaches and provide professional development to faculty to implement new instructional strategies.

Fortunately, there are promising efforts underway to break the cycle of rising costs and stagnant output. In recent years, a number of states have developed promising new models for improving college and lowering costs at the same time. Several governors have led the push to launch new universities that are injecting new energy and innovation into higher education. Others are setting up high-quality online campuses and helping traditional institutions overhaul courses with technology, boosting student achievement while reducing costs simultaneously.

These innovative models can be adapted by governors nationwide to increase the number of college graduates in tough economic times.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Require public higher education institutions to collect and publicly report data on who is enrolled in remedial education, how successfully they complete remediation, and what percentage go on to earn a college credential;
- Set benchmarks for increasing the success of students in remedial education to include timely completion of remediation, success in college level courses, and college completion;
- Recognize institutions or programs that have successfully increased the success of remedial education students and encourage them to provide leadership to state reform efforts; and
- Hold institutions accountable for the achievement of remedial education benchmarks, and provide incentives for implementing strategies that increase student success and decrease costs.

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