

Pinpointing What's Needed: Better Diagnostics

Most reforms in remediation deal with how to deliver the material. But a growing number of initiatives are instead focused on how to define and measure the problem. The fundamental question: are current assessments and requirements placing students in remediation they don't need?

Differentiated requirements. In 2007, community college leaders in Virginia decided that the developmental education system was so broken that it was foolish to think they could fix it incrementally. So they completely revamped it. As Glenn DuBois, the chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, recalls, they decided at the time that they couldn't "do any worse."¹²

The first challenge was developing a new remediation system for math, the subject community college students struggle with most. In most community colleges, remedial math needs are determined by a high-stakes test meant to reveal whether students have mastered a single, linear sequence of math knowledge, starting with fractions and ending with Algebra 2.

At some colleges, students are held to the exact same standard on this test whether they aim to earn a higher degree in physics or a certificate in massage therapy.¹³ Virginia community colleges decided instead that students should take only the developmental

coursework they need for the program they will enter. Math is divided into nine modular units, on which students are tested. Only students intending to transfer to a four-year college and major in math and science fields need be deemed proficient in all nine areas to begin college-level work. Liberal arts majors must show only that they know the first five units, while students entering career and technical programs take tests assessing only the basic skills needed for their areas of study.

Early, limited results have been promising. At Northern Virginia Community College, the first of the system's colleges to pilot the intervention, the number of students enrolled in math remediation dropped by 10.5 percent after the new testing system was put in place, and enrollment in college-level math courses increased by 12.2 percent.¹⁴

In the coming years, the college and system will assess whether students who traditionally entered developmental courses—but no longer do—actually graduate in much larger numbers. If they do, other states and their community colleges will be forced to consider an uncomfortable possibility: innumerable students have long been placed in remedial programs that they didn't need. "I think a lot of the remedial challenge is actually of our own making," says Robert Templin, NOVA's president. Templin, along with other community college leaders in the state, is betting that redefining the problem so it's smaller will be a big part of the solution.

Imperfect assessments. Most community colleges have long used one of two assessments to test entering students for readiness: the Accuplacer, published by the College Board, or Compass, from ACT.¹⁵ But recent research is causing many colleges to reconsider.

Two 2012 reports demonstrated that those tests are used in a way that sometimes leads to radical misplacement, forcing as many as 30 percent of students into developmental courses they simply don't need.¹⁶

Part of the problem is that these tests are aligned to semester-based courses, so students are assigned to a full fourteen weeks of instruction whether their shortcomings relate to material taught in the first seven weeks, the second seven weeks, just two weeks, or the entire semester. And the tests lump together students with quite different remedial needs. A student who did well in high school algebra many years before and only needs to brush up on forgotten material may be placed in the same math course as someone who failed high school algebra or never took it at all.

Some colleges encourage students to study for the test and even provide them study guides so that if all they need is a brush-up, they'll do okay. This simple, low-cost step can make the difference between a degree taking two years to complete or taking three—or more.

But even if students are well prepared, that doesn't fully help if the tests themselves result in poor placement. Research suggests that evaluating grades from high school transcripts along with standardized tests can improve remedial placement decisions.¹⁷ Colleges across the country are trying to figure out how to amass the staff resources to do this, especially when so many students register for classes at the last minute and about a quarter have been out of high school for many years.¹⁸ But while community colleges in several states are working to remedy weaknesses in remedial assessments, most community colleges continue to use the old system.¹⁹