

Transforming Remedial Education to Improve Postsecondary Attainment

12:00-1:30 PM, Friday, July 12, 2013

With recent estimates suggesting that over 50 percent of all college students require remedial education and research indicating that students in remedial education courses rarely earn a postsecondary credential – it is critical that the transformation of remedial education become part of every state's strategy to dramatically increase college attainment rates. Fortunately, new research and innovative practice are demonstrating that dramatic improvements in student success can be achieved. This event explored how state and federal policy can accelerate and support proven reforms that will be central to meeting state and national goals to increase college attainment rates in the U.S.

The panel discussion was moderated by **Stan Jones, President of Complete College America (CCA)**. In his opening remarks, Jones outlined the critical need to reform remedial education in postsecondary institutions.

Jones introduced statistics underscoring this critical need. Studies have shown that 60 percent of community college students start their postsecondary education in remedial courses, while 30-40 percent of first-year students in open-enrollment four-year colleges begin in remedial courses. Contrary to common assumptions, these remedial courses are not limited to adults returning to school for a postsecondary credential; the proportion of students enrolled in remedial coursework is the same for both traditional and nontraditional students. A study by the Community College Research Center tracked students enrolled in Virginia community colleges, and found that attempts at remediation were ineffective; a study of 32 states conducted by Complete College America held consistent with these findings. Researchers found that students who skip their remedial classes perform as well as their classmates who actually attend, and remedial students are half as likely to graduate as their peers who are placed in college-level, credit-bearing gateway courses.

Jones attributed the low success rates of remediation to student attrition. He highlighted more statistics to illustrate the connections between high rates of remediation and attrition:

- 70 percent of remedial math students never attempted the college-level course for which they initially enrolled in remediation classes to prepare.
- Additionally, only 15 percent of remedial math students in Texas ever take college-level math.

As a solution, Jones highlighted four of Complete College America's seven Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education.

- Completion of a set of gateway courses for a program of study is a critical measure of success toward college completion.
- Enrollment in a gateway college-level course should be the default placement for many more students.
- Additional academic support should be integrated with gateway college-level course content – as a *co*-requisite, not a *pre*-requisite.
 - For example, the University of Maryland offers credit-bearing math courses comprised of five weeks of remediation followed by ten weeks of gateway course

material; although the class is for students who fail the initial placement exam, 90 percent of students who take this class pass the placement test when they take it a second time at the end of their five weeks of remediation.

- Multiple measures should be used to determine the placement of students in gateway courses and programs of study.

Jones noted the increasing number of states passing legislation and pursuing policy to reform postsecondary reform, and applauded those efforts, concluding, “We cannot do worse than we are doing today.”

Dr. Katie Hern, Chabot College and Director of the California Acceleration Project, offered a practitioner perspective on remediation and discussed how community colleges in California have begun reforming the way they offer remedial instruction.

Hern placed high value in community colleges, and their accessibility to all students despite their previous academic experiences. She noted that while she is driven by her students’ tremendous capacity to achieve despite their current skill levels, meeting their need for remediation remains a major concern. Attrition has been an unintended consequence of traditional models of developmental education, but Hern has found that classrooms offering high levels of challenge and support can change the effectiveness of remediation. This is especially important because of the disproportionate impact of remediation on students of color: over half of black and Latino students are placed three or more levels below college-level math, making them less likely to complete the gateway math course or earn a postsecondary credential.

The Community College Research Center found that by cutting the traditional two semesters of English remediation to an accelerated one-semester course, the number of students who continued to complete the gateway English class increased. Additionally, one pilot strategy aims to stave off attrition by offering an individualized approach to remediation relevant to a student’s anticipated program of study. Humanities students in need of math remediation courses enroll in pre-statistics instead of algebra; early studies show that this program increases student gateway completion somewhere between 200 and 400 percent. Hern noted that California’s current “decentralized” system of community colleges requires the California Acceleration Project to individually convince each of the state’s 122 community colleges to reform its current program of remediation.

Dr. Tristan Denley is Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs at Austin Peay State University (APSU). Offering an institutional perspective on remediation, retention, and completion, Denley highlighted promising practices recently piloted at APSU.

APSU has a high number of nontraditional students, and over two-thirds of students require remediation in either math or English. Denley found that placing students in traditional remedial coursework actually resulted in college completion rates lower than simply placing remedial students in gateway courses.

To counter this, APSU reformed its remedial instruction. Now, the university enrolls remedial math students in math gateway classes but mandates that they attend additional workshops. Since

the change, APSU's passage rate for this gateway course has grown from 10 percent to between 70-80 percent. Additionally, students who continue taking math courses after completing the gateway class with extra support sessions often find much greater success in higher level classes than previous remedial math students. Since APSU cannot offer reading remediation as a credit-bearing college-level English class, the school pairs mandatory reading support workshops with a credit-bearing history course; this led to an increase of 50 percent to 75 percent of remedial reading students passing gateway English.

Dr. Matt Gianneschi, Vice President of Policy and Programs and Director of the Postsecondary and Workforce Institute at the Education Commission of the States (ECS), discussed the policy landscape surrounding postsecondary remediation reform. ECS co-authored "[Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education](#)" with Complete College America, and recently released "[The Blueprint for College Readiness](#)."

Gianneschi proposed that since K-12 and postsecondary education no longer operate in separate spheres, federal policymakers will soon be forced to address how to integrate both systems. One arena in which K-12 and postsecondary institutions are already helping one another is dual enrollment; on this topic, all 50 states have policies and programs, but each state is different. For example, Colorado has students taking college-level remedial and vocational courses while still enrolled in high school to ensure they are prepared for credit bearing courses upon entry into college. Gianneschi also suggested that federal policymakers look to the states for examples of how to create policy addressing this average student's needs. The typical U.S. college student is an adult student, who is enrolled part-time and demonstrates financial need. Additionally, the average college graduate has transferred at least once during her college career; nationally, more than one-third of college students have transferred more than twice.

Gianneschi closed by framing the challenge of remediation for policymakers: Currently only 74 percent of students graduate from high school. If we are to reach the goal of a 60 percent college graduation rate as outlined by President Obama, then 81 percent of all high school graduates must attend and successfully complete college.

Question & Answer Period

What impact can changes in remediation have on financial aid policy?

Denley answered with an example from his home institution, Austin Peay State University. APSU developed a computer program that uses students' high school transcripts and interests to determine which courses individual students should take to be the most successful. Denley likened this recommendation tool to an educational Netflix. This program has been in use for two years, during which time the course completion of average remedial students has increased by five standard deviations. Additionally, the course completion rate of APSU's Pell recipients has increased seven standard deviations. This allows students to streamline their coursework in a way that allows them to minimize debt.

Gianneschi highlighted several areas where policy makers can affect change in remediation through financial aid policies. First, he noted the need for changes in accountability. Institutions

should be held accountable for graduates who receive financial aid, and he pointed to Colorado's policy of disbursing need-based aid tied to student performance. Since performance is measured by credit hour accumulation, schools receive more funding only as students make progress.

Similarly, Gianneschi proposed that the federal government change the way it disburses financial aid. He suggested that financial aid be paid out in increments throughout the semester, instead of in one lump payment at the semester's start. This allows students to see if they can be successful in college before incurring a whole semester's worth of debt.

Next, Gianneschi commented on areas for improvement within the current FAFSA system. Developed to provide aid to residential teenage students, the current system does not work well for adults. New ways to calculate need are required, and policy makers could develop an Estimated Family Contribution that more accurately reflects the needs of adult learners.

Can you expound on the role that accountability systems might play with respect to remediation reform?

Gianneschi said legislation was a possibility, but again recommended looking at progress already made at the state level. States are currently adopting common definitions of "college and career ready." In addition to these definitions comprising the high school exit criteria, colleges could also incorporate these high school standards into their own admission process as an instrument in determining college entrance. States are also tying accountability systems and metrics together at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. Gianneschi questioned how teacher preparation programs might be used to improve student outcomes, and if data structures could be integrated to reflect and predict student ability more accurately than an ACT test.

Financial aid systems may also need accountability measures put in place. Some states give upperclassmen more financial aid than freshmen, but despite putting a premium on college completion, this policy has also created the unintended effect of competition for transfer students.

Hern suggested that K-12 accountability systems might offer the potential for increased data collection at public universities. A Long Beach Community College study found that a student's high school grade point average is a better predictor of college success than standardized tests. Tests like the ACT and SAT only predict a student's ability on other standardized tests and do not measure her assiduousness or grit, factors that are reflected in her grade point average. The same study showed that when colleges use grade point average to determine course placement instead of placement exams, the number of students classified as ready for gateway English triples. Colleges do not currently have access to this information. Hern proposed that K-12 and postsecondary institutions should implement a shared data system, and use this data as part of a push to stop defining readiness in a way that creates more remedial students.

Denley noted that the few existing metrics to assess the success of institutions of higher education are designed to track residential teenaged students. Measurements like six-year graduation rate effectively render the "average" student – those older students who have transferred at least once - completely invisible; half of APSU students are transfers who are not reflected in this particular measurement. Institutions should continue to change their methods of

measurement; new metrics measure how students move through degree programs, instead of time to graduation.

How many remedial students are coming out of the criminal justice system? How should they be addressed in new models?

According to Hern, there are no initial classroom surveys given to measure the number of former offenders being placed in remedial classes, although some of her students did privately volunteer this information about themselves. The accelerated model already in place at Chabot could potentially work for them, but it remains difficult to predict which specific groups will find success with this program. Jones added that institutions of higher education have disadvantaged poor students and students of color - disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system - by only allowing them access to remedial courses at the beginning of their college careers.

How can MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) and online distance courses address and alleviate the need for remediation?

Jones noted that students typically perform incredibly poorly in entirely online courses. Hybrid courses can help, as can guidance counselors; Western Governors University has a particularly successful online program that requires weekly check-ins with an adviser. To be successful, online students must have a tie to a person or an on-campus situation.

Denley suggested that MOOCS are just one part of a much richer educational landscape. As educators attempt to re-imagine how to remediate in preparation for gateway coursework, MOOCS could be one of many tools in this re-envisioning. Exciting new tactics like MOOCS may be required to reach some students, especially those looking for ways to return to college. Online learning could push those students teetering on the brink back into college.

What are some states who come to mind in terms of best practices in transferability and dual enrollment?

Gianneschi identified Florida, Colorado, and Oregon as models of best practices in transferability. Washington State has the longest running policy in regards to dual enrollment. He also suggested looking beyond simply degree articulation, but also at course level transferability in determining best practices. ECS prepared a model dual enrollment policy featuring thirteen factors; while no state featured all thirteen model factors, Colorado's dual enrollment policy boasted eleven.

In a perfect world, what would your assessment for placement include?

While discussing this before the forum, the panel agreed that any single assessment will always be imperfect because it cannot predict how students will actually perform in class. Jones advocated for the use of a combination of high school grade point average, ACT or SAT scores, placement tests, and pure personal grit. In a placement system with these criteria, students demonstrating proficiency in each category would be placed in gateway courses, students demonstrating proficiency in no categories would be placed in remedial coursework, and

students demonstrating proficiency in some categories would be placed in credit-bearing classes with remedial support.

Hern added that regardless of the placement test, curricular structure is important, since no students perform well in classes taught three or four levels below the college-level gateway courses. Additionally, advisers should consider each student's individual program of study when determining the best remedial placement.

What are some challenges in remediation for students with disabilities, as they move away from Individualized Educational Plans and other K-12 supports?

Panelists agreed that far too little work has been done in this area. Denley noted one challenge proponents of remedial education face at APSU: many students who are eligible for accommodations refuse them. APSU is currently trying to determine how many of these students are not receiving the supports they need, and how that impacts their academic success. Hern noted that at Chabot, administrators have not found any empirical evidence to support suggestions that students requiring special education services might perform better in a traditional two-semester remedial sequence; this would allow students more time and opportunities to master content. This lack of empirical evidence leads Hern to believe that enrolling these students in credit-bearing gateway courses with extra remedial support is most likely to increase student success.

Who manages the supplemental workshops and supports for these credit-bearing classes, and who orchestrated the transitions from the traditional model of remediation?

Denley notes that at APSU, the supplemental workshops for remedial math students are led by undergraduate student mentors; the university has a math education program, so these workshops allow math education students a chance to practice their craft while providing this extra support for remedial students. The remedial workshops for writing courses are taught by graduate students in English. Adult literacy professionals teach the remedial reading workshops paired with credit-bearing history classes.

In schools that have partnered with CAP, community college professors teach the redesigned courses. According to Hern, the trick is developing collaborative professional development for those professors; professional development is taking place both locally and statewide, and is funded by state chancellor's office. Denley agreed that faculty collaboration is absolutely key to reforming remedial coursework.