Remediation in the Community College

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Community colleges (CC) throughout the United States operate under a mission of egalitarianism in which they offer postsecondary educational opportunities to the masses, through the use of "open enrollment". This policy opens the doors of CCs to anyone who wants to further their educational and vocational aspirations beyond the secondary level. "Open Enrollment" allows everyone the chance to attend an institution of higher education regardless of test scores, Grade Point Averages, or entrance exams that might hinder one’s acceptance to more "elite" colleges and universities. This open door policy along with low tuition rates, in comparison to most 4-year schools, creates tremendous opportunities for the under-prepared and underprivileged individuals graduating from many of our high schools. Due to low performance, motivation, and achievement in elementary and high school, many students do not have the necessary skills and are not prepared to pass the entrance exams required for attendance at 4-year colleges and universities. CCs therefore, are the only alternative for these individuals. Along with opportunity however, comes the problem of under-prepared students taking difficult classes in college environments. The question of how to get these students up to speed with the rigors of college-level work to attain the knowledge and skill set needed to perform in an academic setting arises. The solution thus far has been the use of remedial education.

Remedial education involves specific courses, generally in reading, writing, and mathematics, tailored to students lacking the fundamental skills necessary in these areas to perform at the college level. Remedial courses are designed to give students the skills necessary in order to achieve success in the rigorous arena of higher education. The issue of under-prepared students and the concept of remediation however, are not new to the American system of higher education as many may believe. In 1869, Charles W. Elliot, the president of Harvard stated, “The
American college is obliged to supplement the American school. Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply” (Span, 2000, p. 2). This goes to show that the issue of remediation has been around for quite sometime. In fact, Span (2000) states that this concern has plagued the American system of higher education since its conception. Although this matter is not new, lately it has been under increased scrutiny by many parties.

Before addressing the concerns that many have with remedial work in higher education, it is necessary to understand the types of students that actually represent this population in need of remediation. Many simply assume that these are students who have just graduated from high school, and due to either laziness or lack of interest, did not acquire the skills necessary for college-level work. It is true that many remedial students are recent high school graduates, about 60% according to literature reviews by Oudenhoven (2002), but should these students not be given a second chance? “Research shows that the most significant factor (for remediation) may be that remedial students did not participate in a college- preparatory curriculum in high school” (Oudenhoven, 2002, p. 39). Is it the unknowing student’s fault that their counselors did not advise them to take such a curriculum? And what about the other 40%? Who makes up this population? These are adult students who, due to vocational changes, the need for new skills, or simply new interests, want to earn college degrees. Should these students not be allowed to return to college because they have been away from academia and have forgotten some of the necessary skills? It is obvious that remedial students are diverse in their needs and backgrounds, and are due what they rightly deserve: an equal opportunity to higher education.

Members of the community, including students and their parents, administrators, faculty, legislators, and tax payers, have all voiced their concerns over the subject of remediation in
higher education. Three major complaints have been related to courses costing too much, taking too long, and due to the fact that remedial courses usually do not carry any college credit, keeping students from progressing towards a degree (Boylan, 1999). It is true that extra money is needed to support the extra services offered to these students. Students enrolled in remedial work will need to spend more time in college than his/her counterpart who does not take these classes, and most remedial classes at postsecondary institutions do not carry any credit towards a bachelor’s degree. These all appear to be valid arguments, but how accurate are they, and do they extinguish the need for remediation?

The cost of remedial education appears to be an issue that is often debated. Researchers have concluded that remediation in higher education costs the U.S. government about $1 billion annually, or roughly 1% of its educational expenditures on higher education (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Merisotis & Phipps (2000) actually believe this number to be closer to $2 billion which would constitute about 2% of the annual budget. For something so important, they feel this is a very modest amount to be spent. Even with this small expenditure, Span (2000) writes of a recent report that illustrates, if only one-third of remedial students were to earn their bachelor’s degree, as a whole, they would create over “$74 billion in federal taxes and $13 billion in state and local taxes, while costing the taxpayer about $1 billion to remediate. Furthermore, the graduation rate for remedial students would have to drop below the 1% level before taxpayers would see a net loss on investment” (2000, p. 1). According to these statistics, the cost of remediation is not so great.

In response to complaints about remedial coursework taking too long and not contributing to the completion of a degree, the fact is that the majority of college students requiring remedial work usually complete this requirement in less than one year (Boylan, 1999).
In fact, 80% of students only need one or two remedial courses (Oudenhoven, 2002). This is really not that long when considering the alternative is no college experience at all. Also, this requisite becomes even more worthwhile when one considers the fact that even those who attend a community college without receiving a degree earn more than those who never attend college (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005). For those who actually complete their degrees, their earning potential is even higher.

Another major issue under review by states and systems of higher education, is the question of who should be responsible for educating the under-prepared student wanting to prosper through a postsecondary education? Research shows that in 2000, 28% of all entering freshmen enrolled in at least one remedial course, with 20% of freshmen at public 4-year institutions and 42% of freshmen at public 2-year institutions enrolling in remedial coursework (NCES, 2003). It is obvious that many are in need of remediation, but many 4-year institutions believe these students are not their responsibility and therefore should not have to take up the burden of fulfilling their remedial needs. At least ten states currently discourage, or have restrictions against providing remedial education at 4-year institutions; and of these, three including: New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, provide no state funding for remedial services at 4-year schools (Jenkins & Boswell, 2002). Although research has shown that students who begin at 4-year institutions, as compared to 2-year CCs, are more likely to receive their bachelor’s degrees, (Baker & Smith, 1997), it is clear that many 4-year institutions do not want to take on the added responsibility of the remedial student. As more and more students get forced out of 4-year institutions due to remedial needs, the percentage of these students enrolled in community colleges will continue to increase. The issue at hand therefore, is not if remediation should be
offered, but how best can these institutions serve the increasing number of under-prepared students. The answer to this question is by creating successful and efficient remedial programs.

Boylan (1998), the director for the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University, has done extensive research over the years on remedial education, and from his findings has identified the most effective and successful techniques used in its implementation. The following are some of Boylan’s (1998) major findings based on over 200 pieces of literature: (a) an institution-wide commitment to remediation; (b) mandatory assessment and placement; (c) program evaluation: constant evaluation of remedial programs and adaptation of practices based on findings; (d) professional training: faculty and staff trained specifically to help under-prepared learners; (e) centralized remedial programs; (f) consistency of academic standards: remedial exit standards meeting entry standards for curriculum courses; (g) counseling; (h) tutoring; (i) mastery learning: using small units of teaching and frequent testing; (j) a variety of teaching methods; (k) paired courses: pairing of a remedial course with a regular curriculum course, where the instructors collaborate on teaching, helped to mainstream remedial students into the regular program, while earning college-level credits; (Boylan, 1998). A collaboration between high schools and colleges to help make known the necessary skills needed to succeed in college has also been a major suggestion throughout the literature, as well as strict attendance policies and prohibition of late registration (Boylan et al, 1999).

“The research indicates that developmental programs employing sound organizational and teaching strategies have been consistently linked to higher passing and completion rates in courses, better student grades, and higher rates of retention” (Boylan, Bonham, & White, 1999, p. 94). Students who need remedial work, take the necessary classes, and pass them, have shown to do better than their counterparts with similar backgrounds that have not taken the remedial
coursework (Bettinger & Long, 2005). This proves that remedial education can work, and is not only successful, but necessary. If more programs use the techniques listed above, the number of under-prepared students furthering their education and completing degrees will increase.

According to Boylan et al (1999), there are only two ways to eliminate or reduce the need for remedial education: to significantly improve the preparation of students in the public school systems, or to drastically downsize higher education. Since our goal is to provide higher educational opportunities for all who aspire to them, then the former action must be approached. The only way to end remediation is for our students to develop the necessary skills needed to succeed in college through their elementary and high school careers. Due to the fact that many of our students enter our school systems disenfranchised, this is a very difficult feat.
References


