



Trends and Challenges in Remedial/Developmental Education across the States

A Brief for the Arkansas Conference on Early Remediation: November 20, 2013

Introduction

The aims of this briefing paper are to: a) provide a national overview of the current state of developmental education; b) discuss the national challenges and issues associated with improving the effectiveness of developmental education programs and; c) consider models, strategies, and policy implications for improving developmental education in Arkansas.¹

A. Overview

It is estimated nationally that the number of adults with postsecondary credentials will need to increase to 60% by 2020 in order to meet the workforce demands in an emerging knowledge economy. Nationally, approximately 39% of adults between the ages of 25-64 currently possess postsecondary credentials: 8.5% hold associate degrees, 19.3% have a bachelor's degree, and 11% hold graduate or professional degrees.

In Arkansas, the rate of adults with postsecondary credentials is 28%, about two-thirds of the U.S. Average. While the college-going rate for students in Arkansas increased nearly five percentage points from 46.9% in 2009 to 51.7% in 2010, the six-year graduation rate at four-year universities fell slightly during this time – from 38.5% 37.8%. (Comprehensive Arkansas Higher Education Annual Report, 2011).

Figuring out developmental education in colleges and universities is important to improve college completion. Among full-time students in Arkansas who require developmental education courses, only 9.4% earn an associate degree in three years and only 22% earn a bachelor's degree in 6 years (CCA, 2012). Each year, thousands of Arkansas students arrive to college needing to take at least one developmental education course, and roughly half of these students do not pass these courses.

Demographic changes are compounding the problem. The fastest growing groups of young people are currently the least likely to graduate from high school or complete college. A recent SEF report highlights the fact that 60% of K-12 students in Arkansas now come from low income households (eligible for free or reduced lunch). African American students are over-represented among these low income students in Arkansas. These students, both black and white, tend to be underprepared academically and more likely to require developmental education courses.

¹ With origins to 1867 and the George Peabody Education Fund, the Southern Education Foundation's mission is to advance equity and excellence in education for low income and minority students. SEF's work focuses on the many factors that influence outcomes from early childhood to young adulthood. Our core belief is that education is the vehicle by which all students get fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. SEF's Consortium for Innovation and Change has engaged a group of campuses in studying emerging practices aimed at enhancing developmental education. Developmental education is used interchangeably with terms like remediation and remedial education.

The benefits for Arkansas of increasing college completion rates are enormous. Dr. Robert Johnston² estimates that Arkansas' annual income would grow by approximately \$30 billion (an increase of about 30% of the state product of \$100 billion), were the state to catch up with the rest of the nation in college graduation rates for adults.

B. Challenges and Issues for Developmental Education

Defining College Readiness: Conceptually the notion of remediation suggests the need to correct or remedy learning deficiencies so that freshmen begin with skills and competencies required for college-level courses. One major challenge has been the lack of consensus across the educational pipeline about what constitutes "college-ready." In the past, institutions of higher education have applied a range of admission requirements, mandatory course sequences, and expectations for incoming students. Arkansas has applied for some years the requirement of an ACT score of 19 or higher to avoid remediation. These differences have added to the diversity of mission and role for America's institutions of higher education, but they also have made it more difficult to define clearly what constitutes "the content knowledge, skills, and habits students must possess to be successful in postsecondary education or training that leads to a sustaining career... without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (Conley, 2013).

This lack of clarity also applies to the concept of "career readiness." An October 2013 survey and report found that "only 14 of the 46 states responding to the survey have a statewide definition of what it means for high school students to be career- or work-ready."

The emergence of Common Core State Standards is an attempt for K-12 systems to define and produce a greater number of students who are indeed "college-ready." Currently, more than 40 states have common core standards in reading, writing, and math, and states like Virginia, Texas, Florida, and Kentucky have created 12th grade transitional courses and end-of-course tests based on college readiness standards and first-year courses. In some states, there has been a focus on achieving better alignment between K-12 and higher education, and joint efforts to assist students to meet the more aligned standards before reaching a college campus. Yet, in most the states, there is no complete, coherent set of learning expectations that have been fully implemented, assessed, or mapped from K-12 schools into postsecondary institutions.

Addressing Costs and Affordability: Developmental education currently costs states, institutions, and students a substantial amount of money. Recent studies suggest that the nation spends an estimated \$3.5 billion in offering remediation courses at two- and four-year institutions. (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In addition, because developmental education courses usually cost the same as any other three-credit course, remediation reduces the available funds that low income students have to finance courses that count toward degree completion. Nationally, the 2011-12 average annual cost of tuition and room and board at public four-year institutions was \$17,131 for in-state students and \$29,657 for out-of-state students. Developmental education contributes in this way to the problem of college affordability.

Using Reliable Diagnostics: Determining which students should be placed in developmental education courses is generally based on standardized test scores (ACT or SAT) or placement exams administered by campuses before students can enroll. Today, many educators question the reliability of the exams and the way they are generally administered. The result, in some cases, is that students are misplaced. Those who should not be placed in developmental education courses are assigned

² Dr. Johnston was Assoc. Dir. For Research and Policy for the Arkansas Department of Higher Education in the Huckabee Administration.

remediation, and some who should be placed in them evade detection, subsequently taking classes they are not prepared to pass. Equally challenging is the fact that students who fall below the minimal score on placement exams have varying levels of ability. Those who barely missed passing the exam are often placed in the same courses as those who will require intense subject remediation. Today, higher education across the nation uses blunt tools for placing students in developmental education courses and a fairly blunt tool for remediating them once there.

Developing Effective Programs: Presently, there is much more documented research about what does not work in developmental education programs than understanding what does. There is a good deal of consensus among researchers that simply placing students in a 16-week pre-requisite course is not the best method. There are a number of program designs, theories, and practices currently in play. Some involve early accreditation, accelerated courses, computer-assisted instruction, prescribed course sequences, tutoring supplements, the use of math labs, peer grouping, or the option to test out of a developmental course at any time during a semester. Less clear is which of these methods are most effective, for which courses, and for which groups of students. Developmental education courses are too expensive for students and too costly for institutions to not have a better sense of which program models are most effective and why.

Some questions to be addressed about what works best include:

1. On college or high school campus?
2. 8th grade, 12th grade or all?
3. After school, Saturdays, summers?
4. Type of instruction?
5. How to apportion scarce resources/triage?

Improving Data Capacity and Analysis: Most campuses serving a high percentage of students in developmental education courses are capable of detailing how many are enrolled in these courses, how many pass, and the number that subsequently enroll in entry-level college courses. What they are unable to do, in most cases, is explain why some students are successful and why a high percentage of students is not. Being able to answer questions, with reliable evidence, about why students succeed or fail will be necessary for sustained success with different students in different locations.

C. Models in Improving Developmental Education

Across the nation, several states have adopted and implemented institutional and state mandates to reduce the need for developmental education. For example, Florida's 2013 Senate Bill 1720 has resulted in the creation of an office of K-20 Articulation in the Department of Education to address K-12 and higher education alignment and to ensure students who successfully complete secondary education are prepared for higher education (The Florida Senate, 2013).

In the state of Kentucky, steps were taken to expand student access to developmental education. A 2001 Kentucky law mandated that all students entering undergraduate programs at public institutions who receive a score of 17 or below on ACT subject exams in math, English, or reading be placed in developmental education courses or receive supplemental help in those subjects (Hiemstra, 2005).

In 2008, the "Preschool to Postsecondary Education Alignment Act: Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K)" legislation was passed, which eliminated the assessment program that was used at the time and replaced it with state content standards for high school that were aligned with postsecondary

and workforce planning, and readiness assessments (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2012). The goal of the legislation was to eliminate the need for further developmental education in the state.

Recently, Texas has introduced additional changes to their 2003 Texas Success Initiative by introducing a new placement test, the Texas Success Initiative Assessment to the policy (Texas Administrative Code, 2013). The policy incorporates a new assessment test, but similar to the state of Florida, also includes a number of broad exemptions from both the assessment and developmental course requirements.

D. Implications for Developmental Education in Arkansas

There are many program designs, theories, and practices across the United States for developmental education, but there is limited evidence about which practices are more effective at preparing students for college and career. Clearly, there is no one way that has been proven best. Hence, every state, including Arkansas, must proceed in establishing approaches to improving developmental education by answering the primary questions with imperfect knowledge about what works best and in the context of their own specific state. As this brief illustrates, the primary questions to address are:

- 1) What are the best, common criteria to determine college readiness and accurately identify whether high school students are prepared for college?
- 2) Are students are being placed into the most appropriate developmental education programs?
- 4) When, where, and how should K-12 systems align with higher education systems to ensure that students are prepared for college work?
- 5) How can we assess rigorously the effectiveness of current and future developmental education strategies for preparing students and advancing college completion?

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