



Choosing Who Delivers:

The Impact of Placing Limits on the Delivery of Remedial Education at Four-Year Institutions

Getting Past Go Project

Education Commission of the States (ECS)

Matthew Smith, Associate Policy Analyst

May, 2012

Getting Past Go project staff examined state and system policies that limit four-year institutions from delivering developmental education and considered the potential impacts of these policies on student success. While, in general, few states have categorical prohibitions against remedial course delivery at four-year institutions, we found the nature of the limits and the varied institutional responses to them place added pressure on the postsecondary system, which could negatively impact student success.

Remedial Limits: Penny Wise and Pound Foolish?

State policymakers are looking for creative ways to stretch postsecondary dollars. To that end, some states are charging public community colleges with being the primary, if not sole, provider of remedial education by either prohibiting four-year institutions from delivering remedial education or by allowing remedial education under very specific institutional or financial conditions. At first glance, having community colleges be the primary, if not exclusive provider of remedial education makes sense, when one considers the sector's lower instructional costs and open-access mission. Nevertheless, states should evaluate whether this attempt to reduce costs and maintain mission differentiation is detrimental to student success before instituting policies that restrict the role of four-year institutions in developmental education.

This policy brief will explore:

- Current policies that limit remedial course delivery at four-year institutions
- Institutional responses to policy limits and their potential impact on student success
- The pressure that limits could place on other components of the postsecondary system
- A set of companion policies or strategies that could alleviate system pressures created by institutional limits, and improve student outcomes.

State & System Strategies

We identified 21 states and systems that either prohibit remedial coursework at four-year institutions or strongly discourage programs by eliminating funding for developmental education. The policies appear below in one of five categories.¹ We distinguished policies according to the level of flexibility and institutional choice they provide. While the main objective of these state policies is to shift remedial coursework to two-year colleges, at least seven states have defined extenuating circumstances in which some four-year institutions can deliver remedial courses.

No remedial courses, ever: Four states and systems have adopted approaches that prohibit course-based remediation at all four-year institutions, regardless of selectivity, student need, or institutional capacity.

Ex. Indiana, New York (CUNY), South Carolina, Tennessee

Funding limits: Seven states or systems restrict or eliminate funding for remedial courses at some or all four-year institutions. These policies do not prohibit remediation, but produce strong disincentives, because institutions must fund courses through tuition and fees alone.

All four-year institutions: South Dakota

Some but not all four-year institutions: Colorado, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah

Minimum admissions standards: States or systems restrict student admissibility or enrollment at four-year institutions for students with remedial needs. The four state university systems below deny students admission, until they can prove their readiness for college-level math or English—either through retaking a placement exam or succeeding in remedial courses delivered at community colleges.

Ex. Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oregon

Two-year sector should be primary provider: State or system policy recommends that developmental education courses be delivered at two-year institutions, but does not overtly prohibit remedial education at four-year institutions.

Ex. Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Virginia

Conditional exemptions: Six states have created provisions that limit remedial instruction but provide exceptions for four-year institutions who meet certain criteria. These strategies allow course-based remediation, if:

- A four-year institution is open-access or moderately selective (Oklahoma, Texas, Utah)
- Community colleges are not present in a given geographic area (Louisiana, Oklahoma)
- The state or system defines the four-year institution as a minority-serving institution (Florida)
- Remedial courses were delivered by the institution before a given date and, therefore, are grandfathered in as being eligible to offer remedial education (Florida)
- Program costs do not surpass that of a given year (Arkansas)
- Student remedial needs at the college exceed the state community college average (Florida).

Six Institutional Responses to Policy Limits

While some policies prescribe approaches to help institutions manage the delivery of developmental education, most responses are initiated, formally or informally, by the institutions themselves. The question is whether the institutional responses facilitate the adoption of practices that increase student success or create additional barriers to college completion. Typical institutional responses include:

Referral

Policymakers can mandate or institutions may decide that students who apply to four-year institutions and are assessed as needing developmental education be referred to a community college to receive developmental education. Students are not admissible to the four-year institution until they have at least completed their remedial education sequence. In this instance, students must apply for transfer once they complete their developmental coursework.

Outsourcing

Outsourcing allows four-year institutions to partner or contract with community colleges to deliver developmental education. States either prescribe outsourcing through formal contractual arrangements or encourage institutions to partner as a way of accommodating four-year limits. Depending on the agreement, students may co-enroll at the community college and four-year institution, or gain full admission to the four-year institution, receiving developmental education from community college instructors at the two-year college tuition rate and state funding levels. Nonselective four-year institutions might be reluctant to partner with community colleges that they perceive as a competitor for students.

Pre-enrollment options

A growing number of four-year institutions, especially those serving a substantial number of underprepared students, offer remedial services outside of the traditional academic year, often in compressed, four-to-six week summer programs. Elisabeth Barnett presented [research](#) on the impact of summer bridge programs at eight Texas institutions. She found that participation in the bridge program

accelerated students' progress through remedial education, but that the programs did not significantly change enrollment patterns or the number of college credits accumulated.²

Offering course-based remediation without state support

In situations where states have cut funding for remedial education at four-year institutions but have not prohibited it outright, institutions may choose to offer remedial courses without state support. Students either pay a higher tuition rate or institutions assume the additional cost while holding tuition constant. Given that remedial education is often less expensive to offer than college-level courses, remedial education could still be delivered at a reasonable cost, even without a state subsidy. While funding restrictions remove the economic incentive to enroll more students and place them into remediation, the temptation might be to pass the cost onto students or compromise instructional quality.

Supplemental, noncourse options

In this approach, four-year institutions still deliver remedial content, just not in a course-based setting. Institutions create fee-based labs or other academic supports that are aligned with college-level courses. Students receive structured learning assistance (SLA) while enrolled in the college-level course. [Austin Peay University](#) responded to course-based prohibitions by developing enhanced gateway math courses, which require students to attend two hours of weekly lab. Passage rates for students who enrolled in these enhanced, non-algebra and college statistics courses were significantly higher than under the old sequence of two pre-requisite remedial education courses.³ In a thorough study of student outcomes in the Virginia Community College System, researchers found that students who ignored placement recommendations performed as well as students who enrolled in developmental courses, suggesting that many students who are placed into remedial courses could be successful in college-level courses.⁴ As a result, four-year institutions should consider enhanced gateway courses, rather than referral to community colleges, as the preferred strategy for complying with limits on instructional delivery.

Mainstreaming

Institutions may forgo course-based remediation or supplemental options and admit students directly into college-level courses without formal interventions. Institutions rely on faculty to provide remedial support in college-level courses on an informal, case-by-case basis, often referring students to existing tutoring or academic support systems without aligning the services with course content. The challenge with this approach is that it can drive remedial instruction 'underground,' making it difficult for institutions or states to monitor or measure effectiveness. Also, this model could be counterproductive for open access, four-year institutions that rely on underprepared students to meet enrollment goals.

State and System Assumptions

Both the policies limiting four-year institutions from delivering remedial education and the subsequent institutional responses depend on certain assumptions about existing institutional capacity to execute the policy objectives. The assumptions implied in the policies and strategies are as follows:

- **Placement exams** are an effective measure of student readiness for college-level work.
- The current system of **assessment and placement** accurately refers students and provides assurances that students will receive a placement that maximizes their chances for success.
- The **quality** of remedial education delivered at two-year institutions is of a higher quality and more cost effective than when delivered at four-year institutions.
- **Transfer** mechanisms are well articulated and can successfully transition students to four-year institutions once they complete their remedial courses.
- **Students** are undeterred by being placed at community colleges to complete remedial education and continue to be motivated to pursue a postsecondary credential.

Unfortunately, there is little research that indicates that these assumptions are true on many campuses. For example, research has found that:

- Assessment and placement practices often result in students being misplaced into developmental education courses.⁵
- Existing models of separate remedial education sequences are ineffective due to high attrition rates from remedial courses and low completion rates in college gateway courses.⁶
- Students receive little information about the high-stakes nature of the placement process, their prospects for success in postsecondary education based on exam results, and the various academic options available based on their skills.⁷
- Resources for advising and mechanisms for transfer are often insufficient in facilitating student success.

Because of recent research revealing the failures of the current system of remedial education, a policy placing limits on four-year institutions could be akin to shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic. In fact, institutional limits could exacerbate the existing weaknesses of the system if they are not addressed in the policy implementation process. Instead, institutional limits should be couched within a more comprehensive overhaul of remedial policy and practice, where the foremost objective is propelling underprepared students toward a college credential. In the next section, we describe the potential implications of institutional limits on the larger postsecondary system.

System Pressure Points

Policy limits on the delivery of remedial education could place additional pressure on already strained institutional pressure points on many four-year campuses. If these pressure points lack integrity, then the entire system could ultimately fail students. We have identified the following four pressure points that could be compromised by placing limits on which institutions can deliver developmental education:

Assessment and Placement

If placement exams determine placement in remedial courses and, as a result, restrict access to four-year institutions, the policy would further amplify the high-stakes nature of assessment systems. If those assessments are ineffective, then there is a strong probability that thousands of students could be referred to community colleges unnecessarily. Referring students to community colleges could stunt their progress and undermine state college completion goals.

To avoid this unintended consequence, institutions should use multiple measures to determine placement in or out of developmental education. According to recent research by the Community College Research Center, high school GPA combined with a placement exam is far more effective than the singular placement exam.⁸

Remedial Education Instruction

Requiring students to receive remedial instruction from community colleges puts additional pressure on that sector to absorb additional students and serve them effectively.

With many successful models to choose from, systems should encourage institutions to adopt instructional models that decrease, or altogether eliminate, the time students spend in developmental education. One specific strategy, which was highlighted above, would be for four-year institutions to admit more students into college-level courses and provide additional supplemental instruction for those who need it. With evidence to suggest that this can actually increase students' chances of passing gateway courses, it should be the default strategy for four-year institutions in complying with institutional policy limits.

Transfer and Articulation

Transfer and articulation processes could be strained when systems and institutions rely on community colleges to deliver remedial education. States should assess whether transfer systems will impede students who complete their remediation at a community college. Without some assurance that students can efficiently transfer back to the four-year institution, some students may not ever make it back to the four-year institution where they originally intended to enroll.

To avoid transfer and articulation challenges, four-year institutions should provide guaranteed transfer to students who successfully complete their remedial education at the community college. As mentioned earlier, institutions could allow students to co-enroll in both community colleges and four-year institutions. In addition, allowing community colleges to deliver remedial education on the four-

year campus while students enroll in other college courses would address the potential problems associated with transfer and the potential stigma of taking remedial instruction.

Student Support Services

Finally, remedial limits could put pressure on student support services that may or may not align well with the needs of underprepared students. Students who have an expectation of four-year enrollment but are referred to community colleges can stretch already lean student support resources. With evidence suggesting that stronger student support services are critical to early college success, providing these services is all the more important for students placed into developmental education courses.

If it is the case that students find themselves referred to community colleges, special effort should be made to provide students with a full range of information about their academic options given their placement. In many cases, students may find that they can achieve their academic goals at the community college. Conversely, students need to be made aware of the data on the success of students who had similar academic goals and skill levels when entering postsecondary education. The bottom line is that students should be given honest and transparent counseling so that they can make an informed choice about how to best achieve their academic goals.

Policymakers should consider institutional limits in a systemic way. Merely shifting students from one institution to another, in the interests of cost and mission, could undermine state goals to increase college completion rates. Surveying these pressure points provides an opportunity for states and systems to adapt institutional limits as the first step in overhauling developmental education.

Instituting Comprehensive Developmental Education Reform

States committed to a policy where developmental education is delivered exclusively or predominantly by community colleges should do so with a vision beyond simply reducing costs and creating greater mission differentiation. Instead, policy limits should be predicated on increasing student success at a reasonable cost. We propose the following policy options that improve the likelihood that policy limits will produce a positive impact on student success:

- Develop a more **reliable assessment and placement process** that is tested for validity and transparent to students.
- Use **multiple measures** for assessing and placing students in remedial courses or college-level courses to ensure that students are not unnecessarily referred to community colleges.
- Implement **supplemental instructional models** at four-year institutions where students receive additional academic support while enrolled in college-level courses.
- Direct institutions to **advise students** whose academic skills are below college level about all options that are available for earning a college credential valued in the workforce and provide opportunities for them to address their academic needs as part of a program of study.
- If students do require more extensive remediation, guarantee that they can immediately **transfer** to a four-year institution upon completion of developmental education.

- **Reward** institutions that show meaningful, annual improvement in the number of academically underprepared students who reach certain credit hour thresholds, transfer to a four-year college, or complete a postsecondary credential.

Opportunity for change

The national completion agenda and state budget constraints have created urgency around the issue of college attainment. As an intermediate step, states should evaluate current or proposed policy to ensure they promote college access and success for underprepared students. There is evidence that certain practices can increase student success while keeping remedial costs low. While a more comprehensive remedial policy for four-year institutions is not a panacea to completion challenges, it would represent a giant leap forward in achieving completion and workforce goals.

¹ For the complete list of policies, with summaries and links, please visit the [Getting Past Go Policy Database](#).

² Elisabeth Barnett, *Developmental Summer Bridge Programs and College Readiness Partnerships* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2012), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=1053>.

³ *Developmental Studies Redesign Initiative—Austin Peay University* (Saratoga Springs: National Center for Academic Transformation, 2009), http://www.thencat.org/States/TN/Abstracts/APSU%20Algebra_Abstract.htm.

⁴ Davis Jenkins, Shanna Smith Jaggars, Josipa Roksa, Matthew Zeidenberg, and Sung-Woo Cho, *Strategies for Promoting Gatekeeper Course Success Among Students Needing Remediation: Research Report for the Virginia Community College System* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2009), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=714>.

⁵ Judith Scott-Clayton, *Do High-Stakes Placement Exams Predict College Success?* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2012), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1026>.

⁶ Thomas Bailey, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung-Woo Cho, *Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2009), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=659>.

⁷ Andrea Venezia, Kathy Bracco, and Thad Nodine, *One-Shot Deal? Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement in California's Community Colleges* (San Francisco: WestEd, 2010), http://wested.org/online_pubs/OneShotDeal.pdf.

⁸ Clive Belfield and Peter Crosta, *Predicting Success in College: The Importance of Placement Tests and High School Transcripts (CCRC Working Paper No. 42)* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2012), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=1030>.