



Remedial Education

The Cost of Catching Up

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Introduction and summary

Across the country, millions of students enroll in college every year only to learn that they need to take classes that will not count toward their degrees because they cover material that they should have learned in high school. According to the authors' analysis for this report, these remedial courses cost students and their families serious money—about \$1.3 billion across the 50 states and the District of Columbia every year. What is more, students who take these classes are less likely to graduate.¹ Simply put, remedial education—or developmental education as it is also known—is a systemic black hole from which students are unlikely to emerge.

After defining remedial education, the authors briefly review the typical methods that institutions employ to identify students in need of remediation and the resulting national demographics of remediated students. Then, the report touches on national rates of progress through remedial education for major racial or ethnic and socioeconomic student groups before focusing on how much money students spend on these courses that do not count toward a degree. While there are certainly reforms to the design of remedial education in higher education institutions that could improve student retention and completion, the recommendations that conclude this report focus on other ways for the K-12 and higher education systems to eliminate the need for remedial education for recent high school graduates.

The national rates of remediation are a significant problem. According to college enrollment statistics, many students are underprepared for college-level work. In the United States, research shows that anywhere from 40 percent to 60 percent of first-year college students require remediation in English, math, or both.³ Remedial classes increase students' time to degree attainment and decrease their likelihood of completion.⁴ While rates vary depending on the source, on-time completion rates of students who take remedial classes are consistently less than 10 percent.⁵

"I felt the remedial courses were a waste of time. ... If I was taught and learned how to think more critically and pushed to achieve more or reach higher standards in high school, I think I would be doing much better in college, and it would be easier."

— Courtney, a first generation college student from Texas

Courtney dropped out of college but had reenrolled by the time of the interview for this report.²

Moreover, the problem is worse for low-income students and students of color, whose rates of remedial education enrollment are higher than for their white and higher income peers. According to a recent study, 56 percent of African American students and 45 percent of Latino students enroll in remedial courses nationwide, compared with 35 percent of white students.⁶

In addition to remedial education's impact on students' academic success, its financial costs are significant and quantifiable. The total figure is staggering: According to the authors' analysis, students paid approximately \$1.3 billion for remediation in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A detailed description of how the authors calculated these costs is included in the Methodology.

While there may always be a need for remedial education, especially for those students returning to school after years in the workforce, the need for remedial education for recent high school graduates can be eliminated by ensuring that high schools do a better job preparing students for college and careers. The failure to do so is costing students and the country in so many ways.

The good news is that there is a way forward. By advocating for implementing higher academic standards such as the Common Core State Standards, students know that by meeting them, they will not need remediation in college. Raising standards is only one strategy to eliminate the need for remediation for recent high school graduates. This report touches on additional efforts that the K-12 and higher education systems and the federal government can undertake to ease the burden of remedial education on students. The higher education and K-12 systems together can increase academic continuity between high school and college by aligning the requirements for both and being transparent with students about what knowledge, skills, and coursework are needed to succeed in higher education. These two systems should also collaborate to reform remedial education by creating consensus around a definition of remedial education, placement practices, and structures for remedial education in public higher education institutions. The federal government can increase accountability for remedial education by tying the receipt of federal student aid dollars to the reporting of better data on remedial programs, including enrollment, placement, progress, and completion rates.

“Because of having to take remedial classes that don't count toward your degree, along with taking the classes that you are allowed to take, you always feel like you are trying to catch up.”

— Victor, who dropped out of University of Texas at El Paso.⁷

Methodology

There is no national standardized data on remedial education enrollment, progress, completion, or cost. To conduct the analysis for this report, the authors used two data sets to derive remedial education enrollment rates. The first data set is from Complete College America, or CCA, and includes actual total and remedial education enrollment for the first-time, full- and part-time fall 2010 cohort, with the exception of the Florida data, which is from the fall 2009 cohort, and the Rhode Island data, which is from the fall 2011 cohort. The CCA data set provides actual enrollment numbers in three mutually exclusive groups—remedial math, remedial English, and remedial math and English—for three types of public institutions—two-year, four-year “very high research,”⁸ and other four-year institutions—for full and part-time students who are U.S. residents, as well as actual remedial rates for these groups based on actual enrollment.

For the same institution types in states outside of this data set, the authors first determined total enrollment using the U.S. Department of Education’s 2014 release of its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS, by combining two figures for U.S. residents, in order to be consistent with the CCA’s data: “full-time first-time degree/certificate seeking students” and “part-time first-time degree/certificate seeking students” for the fall 2013 cohort.⁹ These figures come from the data set labeled “IPEDS sector 2-year and 4-year or above institutions,” as well as from the “very high research” institutions within the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education for 2010.

To get an estimated remedial education enrollment rate, the authors derived a multiplier—against total enrollment for each institution type—by reviewing actual enrollment from the CCA data set. In reviewing

the actual enrollment data for just remedial English, the authors applied a remedial rate of slightly more than 8 percent for two-year institutions to each institution’s total enrollment for a multiplier of 0.0814; slightly more than 1 percent for four-year very high research institutions for a multiplier of 0.0107; and almost 5 percent for other four-year institutions for a multiplier of 0.0471. Estimated remedial math enrollment rates are consistently higher for each institution type, at a rate of almost 26 percent for two-year institutions, with the multiplier equaling 0.256; 4 percent for very high research institutions, with the multiplier equaling 0.04; and slightly more than 18 percent for other four-year institutions, with the multiplier equaling 0.181. Estimated remedial math and English rates are generally lower than math remediation rates alone: slightly more than 25 percent for two year institutions for a multiplier of 0.253; not quite 1 percent for very high research four-year institutions for a multiplier of 0.006; and almost 8 percent for other four-year institutions for a multiplier of 0.0755. In those institutions that do not offer remedial education in either math, English, or both, the authors used a remediation rate of zero percent. For example, South Dakota’s two-year institutions do not offer remedial education and neither do very high research four-year institutions in Connecticut, Hawaii, Louisiana, Missouri, and South Dakota. Likewise, Tennessee’s rates are zero percent at other four-year institutions. Additionally, due to the quality of the data from a specific sub-set of New York public institutions, the enrollment rates in remedial education exclude students in the City University of New York system, which comprises 22 total institutions, seven of which are two-year institutions and collectively enrolled 97,751 students and 15 of which are four-year institutions and collectively enrolled 174,146 students in the fall of 2013—the year for which this analysis is primarily based.¹⁰

To find the remedial education course cost per institution type per state and then the total cost per state, the authors estimated that students take eight college courses per year on average, which breaks down to four classes per semester, and assumed that of these, each remedial course costs the same as each nonremedial course at a single institution. The authors multiplied estimated or actual enrollment, as applicable, by the average course cost for each institution type found in the 2014 IPEDS data, “average net price—students receiving grant or scholarship aid.”¹¹ Specifically, the authors multiplied the number of remedial math or English courses taken at each institution by the price of one course and then calculated the total by multiplying both types of courses by the price of two courses. This resulted in nine subtotals for each state, as applicable: remedial course cost for English, math, and both English and math—for mutually exclusive student counts—for each public institution type: two-year, four-year very high research, and other four-year institutions. These sum into a unique, single total per state.

Then, the authors divided the summed estimated or actual remedial education enrollment numbers by the total enrollment numbers to derive the percentage of remedial enrollment by state.

Student profiles

To identify the students profiled in this report, the authors used several methods. First, the authors administered a survey using SurveyMonkey and followed up with the respondents via phone interviews. Two individuals responded to the survey. Then, the authors reached out to their own former classmates and requested submissions of stories about their remedial education experiences. The responses to the following survey questions—verbatim from the survey instrument—inform the profiles:

- What year did you begin to attend college?
- Where did you attend or are attending college?
- How many remedial courses have you taken or will you need to take?
- How are you paying for those courses?
- Important part (feel free to add other information):
Do you feel like your high school did not prepare you for college? Why or why not? Tell us about your experience with catching up in college through remedial education and any issues you may have encountered.

The survey and follow up interviews were conducted in October and November 2015.¹²

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