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TARA L. PARKER, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS-BOSTON

Ending college remediation: Consequences for access and opportunity

As many states consider reducing or eliminating remediation in four-year colleges, questions related to access, educational opportunity, and promise must be carefully examined.

To what extent does eliminating remedial education impede or facilitate the opportunity to earn bachelor's degrees for underprepared students? Educating underprepared students is often viewed as one of the most challenging and complex issues facing higher education today. Recent policy decisions to end remedial education, however, signify a much too simplified resolution to a multifaceted problem. To date, approximately 22 states or higher education systems (particularly in four-year colleges) reduced or eliminated college remedial coursework. At the same time, many higher education institutional leaders have raised admissions

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standards in the name of improving educational quality. These policy decisions, under the guise of standards-based reform and accountability, more often succeed not so much in improving educational opportunities, but in limiting promise. Many students seeking a baccalaureate degree, too often those challenged by inequities in the K-12 system, find themselves pushed out of four-year colleges and universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Many students are diverted to community colleges where attrition remains high and degree completion rates are quite low (Dougherty, 1992; Laanan, 2001).

This essay examines the potential consequences of policy decisions that reduce or end college remediation¹. Drawing from case studies of the California State University (CSU) and

the City University of New York (CUNY), this essay uses interviews with system and institutional leaders and document analyses of reports, meeting minutes, and press releases to uncover some of the underlying access and equity issues related to changes in college remediation policy. As the second and third largest university systems in the nation, CSU and CUNY are two of the most prominent cases of universities that reduced remedial education. Together they offer lessons to policymakers when considering changes in remediation policy.

CSU and CUNY are two of the nation's largest and most diverse university systems. With more than 400,000 students, CSU maintains 23 campuses. CUNY enrolls more than 200,000 students on 21 campuses

¹The terms remedial or remedial education (instead of developmental) are used in this policy brief to remain consistent with many policy debates that often use the term remedial when considering whether to reduce or eliminate these courses or programs.

that include 11 four-year colleges, six community colleges, and four graduate and professional schools. Students of color comprise approximately 55 and 62 percent of the student bodies at CSU and CUNY four-year colleges, respectively. The proportion of students of color, however, fluctuates by campus, so some are more diverse than others. Both universities were founded to serve the people of the state or in the case of CUNY, the City of New York. Further, CSU is part of the master plan for public higher education in California that designates the university as a middle-tier system between the University of California and the California community colleges. CUNY is also part of a larger, yet less formalized state system that includes the larger State University of New York (SUNY)².

²The SUNY system consists of four-year and two-year colleges.

Political Arguments

Opponents of remediation cite a number of problems specific to institutions. For example, although remedial students often require enrollment in only one or two remedial courses (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006), students are nonetheless considered overwhelmingly academically deficient. Available resources offered by a college or university do not seem to do enough to prepare students for the intellectual life of college. Beyond that is the negative stigma attached to being classified “remedial,” held not only by the population at large, but by the students who may benefit from this instruction. As remedial education remains at the margins of higher education, researchers and college administrators seem to ignore its significance as a gateway to postsecondary learning. Perhaps as a result, many policymakers and mem-

bers of the general public argue that college remediation is too expensive and has surpassed its utility. Remediation is often held responsible for low persistence and graduation rates due to accommodating students considered unqualified for a four-year college. Adelman (2006), for example, reported that only 49 percent of students taking remedial courses completed a baccalaureate degree, compared to 70 percent of those who did not. Opponents of remediation also contend that remedial education courses cause taxpayers to pay twice for skills that should have been developed in high school. In sum, college remediation is touted as the culprit of wasting students’ time and squandering taxpayer money.

Recent research, however, suggests that low bachelor’s degree completion rates are not, as commonly understood, due to enrolling in college remedial courses (Adelman, 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2005). Rather, low graduation rates are linked to a lack of preparation at the secondary school level (Attewell et al., 2006). In other words, there is a misalignment between the academic expectations of high school graduates and those of college freshmen. Until greater alignment of academic requirements occurs, remedial instruction can help underprepared students gain access to higher education. Unfortunately, instead of focusing on this misalignment or underpreparation, many states focus primarily on

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setting higher admissions standards. A focus on admissions policy shifts the emphasis from addressing institution-based issues to locating problems within underprepared students. Many arguments to end college remediation are politically and ideologically based (Shaw, 1997), failing to address the root causes of student underpreparation. Ending remedial education to promote educational quality is therefore a questionable policy decision.

CSU and CUNY Remediation Policies

While remedial education and the impact of its elimination on educational quality remains in debate, state policymakers continue to consider proposals to phase out college remediation. This section discusses some of the choices state policymakers have made regarding remedial education in California and New York. A brief discussion about the policy changes at CSU and CUNY helps to reveal the consequences of reducing or eliminating remedial education and the ways in which future policy may be affected. Changes in state remediation policies over the past decade have ranged from requiring specific scores on placement exams to eliminating public funding for remedial courses. Some proposals considered charging high schools for the cost of “remediating” their graduates in college. Others charge remedial students the “full cost” of instruction, including overhead such as physical plant and maintenance

expenses, for remedial courses. This may equate to three or four times more than standard in-state tuition. Most policies, however, prohibit four-year colleges from offering any courses that are not “college level.” Such policies designate the community college as the appropriate place for remediation and underprepared students.

Scores on standardized placement tests are a common way of identifying remedial students. However, the minimum passing scores to distinguish between college-ready and remedial are not uniform across states or institutions. A student might therefore be deemed remedial at one institution but fully prepared at another institution (Attewell et al., 2006; Merisotis & Redmond, 2002). In fact, one study—controlling for social, demographic and academic backgrounds—found that students with similar ability were more likely to be identified as remedial at a two-year institution than at a four-year college (Attewell et al., 2006).

Policy Considerations

CSU implemented its remediation policy in 1998, while CUNY implemented its policy in phases beginning in 2000. The two university systems used different policies in attempts to reduce or eliminate remedial education, but both emphasized the need for community colleges to provide remedial courses. Both systems required students to take placement exams after admission

but before enrollment to determine college-readiness. At CSU, students identified as remedial were given one year after enrollment to complete required preparatory coursework. At CUNY, however, students with low test scores were ineligible to enroll in four-year colleges. Both situations present many implications for access, educational opportunity, and attainment.

CSU students who failed to complete remedial courses within their first year were subsequently subject to dis-enrollment from the university. These students were referred to one of California’s

FAST FACTS: COLLEGE REMEDIATION

Percent of undergraduates in nonselective, selective, and highly selective four-year colleges who enroll in remedial courses:	47%
Percent of undergraduates at nonselective, selective, and highly selective four-year colleges who enroll in more than three remedial courses:	7%
Percent of students who enroll in remedial education and complete a bachelor’s degree:	49%

Sources: Adelman, 2006; Attewell et al., 2006

community colleges with the option of reenrolling in CSU upon completion of required remedial courses. In contrast, students at CUNY whose test results fell below a certain score were no longer eligible for a baccalaureate degree program and were de-admitted from the four-year college until they could demonstrate proficiency by passing the placement exam. Unlike CSU, four-year colleges in CUNY are part of the same system as its community colleges. De-admitted students may thus opt to enroll in one of the university's six community colleges, but few actually do so (Parker & Richardson, 2005). In 2003, for example, only 1,200 of the more than 4,500 de-admitted students actually enrolled in a CUNY community college the following fall (Parker, 2007). Those who did enroll in the system's two-year colleges were encouraged to complete remediation and the associate's degree before transferring to a CUNY baccalaureate program.

To assist students with meeting new admissions and remediation requirements, both universities sought to work with high schools (Parker & Bustillos, 2007), ostensibly to improve student preparation. Some college administrators at CUNY expanded outreach to inform high school guidance counselors about changes in the university's admissions policies. In addition, CUNY system administrators argued that a university initiative

that partnered a CUNY college with a public high school was a step toward improving college preparation. Yet, some administrators at CUNY's four-year colleges argued that the initiative failed to improve preparation because students enrolled in the program were

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already academically prepared. Administrators said these students already met or exceeded CUNY admissions requirements, even before participating in the collaborative program (Parker, 2005; Parker & Richardson, 2005). Similarly, CSU college faculty went into high schools to improve alignment between K-12 and higher education. The initiative, however, was terminated shortly after implementation due to budget cuts (Parker & Bustillos, 2007). Another CSU program tested high school students in math and English to detect early warning signs related to college-readiness. The extent to which schools used

test results to improve teaching and learning, however, was unclear (Parker & Bustillos, 2007).

Consequences

The cases of CSU and CUNY offer important lessons to other university systems considering policies that reduce or end remedial education. When remediation policies divert students away from four-year colleges and universities, concerns may be raised related to student access and educational attainment. In the case of CSU, because a student's fate is determined by an arbitrary test score, students who might have succeeded in the four-year college were redirected to a two-year institution where their chances of obtaining a baccalaureate degree were likely to be reduced (Bailey & Weininger, 2002; Bernstein & Eaton, 1994; Dougherty, 1992). At the same time, there is no guarantee that students who demonstrate college-readiness will not need academic assistance at the four-year college. Indeed, after CUNY ended remediation, faculty still found students in their classrooms who struggled with math and English (Parker, 2005). Even if there was universal agreement about how to determine college-readiness, there is no evidence to support the notion that remediation in community colleges is more effective than remediation at a four-year institution. In other words, the rationale for shifting

students to community colleges leaves much to be desired.

While many colleges and universities might claim to have improved educational quality by increasing admissions standards and academic credentials of its student body, there appears to be a great deal at stake in terms of potential casualties in the name of academic excellence. Because students of color and low-income students are more likely to require at least one remedial course, it follows that the majority of students turned away from four-year colleges are likely to represent these same groups. More than 2,740 (66 percent) dis-enrolled students were not permitted to return to a CSU campus in 2006 (CSU Division of Analytic Studies, 2007). At least 5,000 students were

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de-admitted from CUNY four-year colleges between 2001 and 2003, and did not enroll anywhere else (Parker, 2005; Parker & Richardson, 2005). Neither university publicized data on the race or ethnicity of students excluded from four-year colleges.

In addition to not knowing who these students are, where they go after they are rejected, de-admitted, or dis-enrolled remains unknown. Nonetheless, preliminary data from CUNY (Parker, 2005) and CSU (Parker & Bustillos, 2007) suggest these students are not attending community colleges (an alternative offered by policymakers). Parker and Richardson (2005) argued that some students who anticipated enrollment in a four-year college may not view the community college as a viable option for them. More research is needed to understand the paths students take after they lose eligibility for a baccalaureate program. Further, CSU data indicate that remedial students who do enroll in community colleges after being turned away from the four-year college are not returning to the four-year institution (Parker & Bustillos, 2007). Additional research related to student experiences and transfer processes in two-year colleges will help to illuminate some of the reasons behind this phenomenon.

Reducing the need for remediation is undoubtedly a complex endeavor. Policies that blame students and exclude them from four-year institutions, where their chances for degree attainment are best, make for unwise public policy. By pointing the finger at the students, as opposed to addressing academic disparities between schools and colleges, higher education policy-

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makers miss the target of reducing remediation. Promoting perceptions of educational quality through elevated admissions standards does little to advance college preparedness. Similarly, there is little evidence to support the notion that eliminating remedial education from four-year colleges increases the academic quality of an institution. Instead, educational opportunity, especially for underserved students, is negated in the pursuit of a more academically homogeneous student population. As institutions move to attract the “best and the brightest,” many students with the potential to “develop smartness” (Astin, 1999) may be permanently excluded from the opportunity to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Eliminating remedial courses and turning students away does little to erase the persistent inequalities that often lead to underpreparation for so many aspiring college students.

Recommendations:

Develop Innovative P-20 Collaboratives.

Instead of de-admitting or dis-enrolling students, college and university administrators should work with K-12 administrators (as well as policymakers and educational researchers) to develop innovative collaborations with secondary schools. The focus should be to improve student preparation and to better align expectations of high school graduates and college applicants with the aim of reducing the need for remediation.

Extend the federal Gear Up Program to include the first and second year of college.

This program presently begins no later than seventh grade and continues through high school. While higher education institutions are involved in these collaboratives to prepare low-income youth to transition from middle school and to go on to high school and college, the focus of Gear Up is presently in schools and not so much on postsecondary institutions. However, higher education institutions should be funded to address issues such as remediation, alignment of academic standards, design and validation of admissions tests, as well as design of curricula and pedagogy to work with underprepared students.

2. Until college preparation is addressed at the K-12 level, removing remedial programs from colleges will do little to resolve underpreparation issues.

Recommendations:

Shift emphasis of remedial policies to focus not only on students, but also on institutions.

Serving remedial students should be a responsibility of the entire college or university community. Remedial education instructors should be full-time faculty who develop and assess their own pedagogies that respond to diverse social and academic experiences students bring with them to the classroom.

Reward institutions that demonstrate success working with underprepared students.

State policymakers should support institutions by providing them with financial incentives to develop strategies that yield improved results with remedial students. In other words, colleges and universities should be rewarded for demonstrating success working with students from diverse academic backgrounds.

3. More research is required to understand the complexities of “no remediation policies.”

Recommendations:

Carefully monitor remediation policies.

State policymakers should monitor universities that have already ended remediation to better understand the impact on students, particularly low-income students, students of color, and adult students who after many years away from school may return to find themselves in need of remedial courses.

Conduct studies to assess the impact of remediation policies on diverse students.

To date, little is known about how changes in remediation policy impact different student populations, student aspirations, college choice, or baccalaureate attainment. Until more research is conducted on the ways that ending college remediation impacts students, the effects on educational opportunity and equity will not be fully understood.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tara Parker is assistant professor of higher education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her research interests include higher education policy with an emphasis on access and equity for underrepresented groups, particularly students of color. Dr. Parker's policy brief is based on her dissertation, *Changing the Rules for Access and Equity: The Elimination of Remedial Education*, and her ongoing research in this area. She is currently principal investigator of the National Access and Remediation Policy Project. This study examines national trends in college remediation policy. It also seeks to improve the understanding of institutional responses and social consequences when changes are made in remediation and admissions policies. Dr. Parker was an ASHE/Lumina fellow in 2004-2005, and completed her Ph.D. in higher education from New York University in June 2005. She can be reached by e-mail at tara.parker@umb.edu.

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