



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP & POLICY

IHELP BRIEF

Prerequisite Policy in the California Community Colleges

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The United States is facing increasingly inadequate college attainment levels and the threat of losing competitive standing on the global stage. The situation is especially dire in California where younger age groups are progressively less well educated and its rank among states in the percentage of adults with college degrees has slipped from third (ages 65 and older) to thirty-first (ages 25-34). A major reason for low college attainment, in California and nationally, is that while enrollment rates are generally high, completion rates are low - across all sectors but especially in community colleges. And a major factor in low completion rates is a lack of college readiness among new college students across broad sectors of American public higher education. In community colleges, the great majority of students enter under-prepared for college-level study - some seriously under-prepared¹. Large percentages of these students never get through remedial education, let alone to college completion. Despite major reform efforts and emerging models, it is apparent that effective remedial instruction has not yet been implemented on a large scale.

The issue at hand is how best to serve the growing numbers of entering students in California's community colleges who are not prepared for college-level work. Should they be required to take remedial coursework right away or at all? What courses should they be allowed to take before they have completed remedial work? What kind of remedial instruction is most effective? Recently, the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges (ASCCC) passed a resolution calling for the modification of the process for establishing prerequisites for student entry into college-level courses. The current system for establishing prerequisites is a complex statistical validation for each pair of courses (the college course and the proposed prerequisite course) to demonstrate with historical data that the prerequisite course increases a student's chances of passing the college course. This process is rarely used due to its complexity and the difficulty of meeting established statistical criteria. Therefore, few prerequisites are in place. With few prerequisites, students have open access to college-level courses whether or not they can read or write at college level or perform basic mathematics. Some under-prepared students pass those courses and some fail or drop them. Unfortunately, because assessment isn't strictly required and assessment scores are not recorded in the system-wide data system, we cannot determine the numbers of under-prepared students who enroll in college-level

courses or their rates of success or failure in those courses.

The ASCCC proposal is to allow colleges to use "content review" instead of statistical validation. With content review, faculty experts in their fields determine the reading, writing, and/or math competencies that students need to succeed in a given college-level course in another discipline, (e.g., History, Economics), determine the courses (most likely basic skills courses) that provide those competencies, and set course prerequisites accordingly.

The proposal is controversial, with two diametrically opposed sets of beliefs. One side believes that **setting prerequisites will harm under-represented minority students** by consigning them to basic skills sequences from which they will not emerge. They cite data showing that substantial numbers of under-prepared students pass transfer-level courses without first completing reading, writing, and/or math remediation as evidence that we direct too many students to basic skills courses. The other side believes that **failing to set prerequisites will harm under-represented minority students** by allowing them to enroll in classes for which they are not prepared to succeed. They cite data showing that substantial numbers of under-prepared students fail to successfully complete transfer-level courses and cite anecdotal evidence of faculty acknowledging the need to lower academic standards to accommodate students in their classes who lack fundamental skills in reading, writing, and/or math.

This issue cannot be resolved on the basis of available data. We lack student-level data on high school transcripts and college assessment results to know who is, and is not, judged to be proficient when they enroll in transfer-level classes. Without this data, we cannot compare the performance of students *with equal preparation levels* who take a transfer-level course with or without having become proficient. We also lack measures of quality or standards for college-level classes, so we cannot know whether under-prepared students pass those courses because they mastered college-level work without completing basic skills or because the course could be successfully completed without, for example, having to read or write at college level. Additionally, we lack measures of quality or standards for remedial courses. If data show that students are not helped by remediation, we don't know whether it is because they should not be directed to remediation or because the remedial courses are not of sufficient quality.

But we can learn from what leading-edge states are doing to increase the success of under-prepared students for whom traditional remedial sequences have not proven

effective. A review of developmental education policy reforms reveals the following trends²:

1. Minimizing the time students spend in remedial coursework by replacing long sequences of semester-long courses with options that include:
 - modular courses with open entry/open exit as students' competencies dictate
 - contextualized remedial courses whereby students learn basic skills in the context of substantive content, sometimes in paired courses
 - supplemental remedial instruction where students with limited deficiencies enroll in college-level courses and receive targeted assistance with needed basic skills
2. Achieving a balance between permissiveness and restrictiveness with respect to access to college-level courses by under-prepared students by:
 - allowing students into college-level courses concurrent with their remedial enrollments as long as the course does not require skills related to those that need remediation (the key being reading – states generally do not allow students who are not proficient in reading to take college-level courses)
 - requiring students to begin and complete remediation early by setting limits, for example, on the number of credits students may earn before completing remediation
3. Using content review to support the overall reform goal of ensuring that students spend only the minimal time needed in remedial education by:
 - examining and aligning the content of college-level and remedial courses
 - using that content review as the basis for placing or directing students into appropriate courses

The current ASCCC proposal to allow for content review as a basis to set prerequisites aligns with the best thinking nationally on how to simultaneously improve remedial instruction while taking a balanced approach to the prerequisite issue. By encouraging colleges to be clear on the skills and competencies that students need in college level courses and designing basic skills courses accordingly, it is also a major step towards improving basic skills. The proposed policy would also lay the foundation for more diagnostic use of assessments so that students can be directed only to those basic skills courses or modules or contextualized courses that they need – shortening the time they spend in remediation. It lays the foundation for creating a set of clear college readiness standards that can communicate to K-12 what will be expected of students who enter the community colleges. Finally, it replaces problematic statistical processes with purposeful alignment of course content, in line with what the leading reform states are doing and consistent with a new report by two leading national policy centers on improving college readiness by aligning competency expectations and assessing proficiencies³.

An expert on state developmental education policy reported that no other state has such a prescriptive policy for what institutions have to do or cannot do to try to improve the basic skills of under-prepared students and none has the kind of “onerous” statistical validation that California has⁴. He confirmed that leading states, such as Texas, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, are using content review as the driving force in reforming the delivery of developmental education to improve outcomes for under-prepared students.

With more explicit reference to prerequisites, another leading expert summarized the new directions as follows⁵:

The most thoughtful states are trying to strike a delicate balance on assessment and placement policy. On one hand, policies that are too permissive allow students to enroll in college-credit courses without adequate preparation or support, setting up both the student and the institution for failure. On the other hand, overly restrictive policies may require students who have a reasonable chance of succeeding without intervention, such as those who fall just below the established cut score for placement into remediation, to enroll in developmental education anyway....Effective state assessment and placement policies will strike a balance between restrictive and permissive rules. (p.9)

The proposal to allow content review reflects these best efforts by putting the focus on course content and letting faculty at the colleges determine what mix of separate basic skills courses, modular courses, integrated courses, etc. will help students acquire the competencies they need in the shortest possible time.

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1. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Southern Regional Education Board, *Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy*, June, 2010.
 2. Education Commission of the States, *Getting Past Go: Rebuilding the Remedial Education Bridge to College Success*, May, 2010, as supplemented by personal communication with lead author Bruce Vandal, July 2, 2010.
 3. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Southern Regional Education Board, June, 2010.
 4. Bruce Vandal, Education Commission of the States, personal communication, July 2, 2010.
 5. Michael Lawrence Collins, *Setting Up Success in Developmental Education: How State Policy Can Help Community Colleges Improve Student Success Outcomes*. Boston: Jobs for the Future, June 2009.

