

SHOULD REMEDIATION BE MANDATORY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE?

Remedial education in the nation's colleges and universities has become an integral component of the curriculum in the majority of these institutions. The inclusion of remediation has prompted much discussion and controversy. The authors examine this controversy and cite evidence for the continued need for these courses in the curriculum.

Background

A major challenge facing our nation's colleges well into the twenty-first century is being imposed upon by the lack of preparedness of college students and their continued need for remediation. The mission of the community college, providing access to higher education, has brought an increasing demand for remedial/developmental studies. As far back as the late 1960s the most frequently offered courses at the community college were primarily remedial in nature.

Our nation is experiencing a rapidly growing "underclass" of citizens (Bell report 11/86). As reported by the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities (Bell rpt. 11/86), 13% of teenagers and 40% of the minority youth in this country are functionally illiterate, and the numbers will not be decreasing in the near future.

Comparative studies of countries participating in the International Assessment of Education Progress in 1991, have shown that American students fared poorly. This report indicates that U.S. high school students ranked seventeenth of nineteen in mathematics when compared to students in other highly industrialized nations. The average score was 58.3%, with the United States' students achieving a test score of 55.3%. Korean students finished first with a test score of 73.4%, with only Jordanian and Portuguese students finishing below the United States' students. Results of the science test scores were similar. The average score was 66.9%, with students from Korea scoring 77.5% and students from the United States 67%. Ireland and Jordan, with scores of 63.3% and 56.5% respectively, were the only countries whose students scored below students from the United States (U.S. Department of Education 1993).

If the intended goal of the United States higher education policy is to maintain open access to higher education, then remediation, especially at the community colleges, is vital. Any perceived educational opportunity without quality is inappropriate. Above all, open access to higher education without remediation will not solve the nation's problem concerning the significant numbers of under-prepared individuals in our society. "Without quality education, the nation loses its strength. Without equity in education, democracy ceases to function." (Bell rpt. 11/86) Bell's comments are just as valid today as when they were first stated ten years ago.

The implementation of an open admissions policy, in an egalitarian attempt to open the doors of the nation's colleges to those who wanted to attend, heralded many problems for the nation's colleges, especially the community colleges. As the number of under-prepared students entering the community colleges increased, so did the problems facing these institutions. Unfortunately, the open door soon began to resemble a revolving door. This caused colleges to reevaluate their philosophy. The increased enrollment of high-risk students forced colleges to modify their educational strategies in an attempt to improve student retention, while simultaneously attempting to maintain educational standards.

A recent report published by the United States Department of Education (1993) states that the percentage of high school graduates attending college increased from 46.6% in 1973 to 62.5% as of October of 1991. Of those high school graduates entering college, 55% begin at the community college level. Evidence seems to indicate that this trend will continue. Increasing numbers of high school graduates attending college need some form of remediation. This became apparent in 1981, when 78.9% of four-year colleges and 83.8% of community colleges were offering some form of

remedial education. By 1991 these figures had increased to 89% and 94.9% respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991).

Developmental/remedial instruction has been introduced to one extent or another at most of the nation's colleges. Virtually every community college in the country is offering some form of remedial instruction. In light of the current mission of the community college to educate the increasingly large numbers of under-prepared students entering the "gates," it is imperative that these students be provided with the appropriate remedial/developmental courses necessary for success. In part, the mission of the community college is distinct from the senior college due to its different population, and it therefore must provide "appropriate remedial and developmental courses for students as well as workshops and training sessions for professors" (Almedia 1991).

Surveys indicate that a voluntary approach to remediation does not seem to work. In schools where remediation, learning labs, and counseling services are available to students on a purely voluntary basis, relatively few students avail themselves of such programs. The results indicate that those students who do not take advantage of these programs do not fare as well with college level courses (Friedlander, 1981). An often-observed phenomenon related to remedial course offerings involves the fact that when these courses are offered on a voluntary basis, more often than not, students least in need of remediation avail themselves of the opportunity to enroll in these courses. The issue raised is whether remediation should be made mandatory and become an integral part of the college curriculum. Many educators believe it should be included. Others believe it should not, that students should be made aware of their need for remediation and then given the option to take the necessary remedial instruction.

Arguments in Support of Mandatory Remediation

Historically it has been shown that those colleges with successful remedial programs implemented the testing and placement of students into remedial programs on a mandatory rather than a voluntary basis, as was the case in the late 1960s and early 1970s Roueche et al. (1985). In the report "Involvement in Learning," astin et al. (1984) make the recommendation that remediation be mandatory for students where needed: "we can offer perfunctory remedial programs, or we can make those programs work while respecting the standards for college-level performance that should lie behind the baccalaureate degree." The report recommends that those students in need of remediation should take a limited program while completing their remedial studies. Furthermore, they should also take at least one course per semester from an academic area of their choice. This would help foster the feeling of accomplishment yet avoid placing an undue academic burden on these students.

It appears that when remedial education is required, it is effective. In order to preserve the mission of the college, while allowing true access to higher education, mandatory remediation must become an integral component of the college curriculum. In a recent article, Tara Fenwick(1994) describes six strategies designed to maintain the community colleges' mission of providing both "access to quality" and "access to success" for their students. Primary among these recommendations was the recognition of the importance of increasing resources specifically designated for the improvement of mandatory remedial programs.

Studies conducted at several colleges support the concept that mandatory rather than voluntary remediation is necessary if academically high-risk students are to succeed. At Grossmont Community College in California, both assessment and remediation were voluntary. The result of this voluntary approach was not successful. Results of a survey indicate that when a group of students who were diagnosed as low achievers were allowed to take college-level courses without remediation, 67% of the group withdrew, dropped out, or failed. Those students in need of remediation who voluntarily placed into remedial courses showed an increase in reading levels, from a fifth-grade level to a ninth-grade level in just one semester, and either completed their community college education or transferred to a four-year college (Weiner, 1985). as a result of this experience at Grossmont, mandatory assessment and placement into remedial courses were implemented.

Since implementation of the mandatory program, more than 14,000 students have been tested or placed into remedial programs. This mandatory placement of students in remedial courses as determined by assessment examinations was reflected by significant improvement in their academic performances.

Arguments Opposed to Mandatory Remediation

Initially, remedial programs are quite costly for various reasons. Colleges and universities often receive funding for courses on a per-credit basis. Remedial courses are usually offered without college credit, and therefore these institutions do not receive equivalent funding for such courses. Providing needed support services, small classes, and release time for faculty development in these remedial programs adds considerably to the costs of these programs as compared to conventional course offerings.

Public officials, in making decisions concerning state funding policies, question the validity of colleges offering remedial programs. In eras of fiscal restraint and increased accountability to the general public, more state legislators are examining the cost-effectiveness, success rates and productivity of colleges and universities. It is their belief that students should have mastered the basic skills in the secondary school and should not have to repeat skills courses again in college at the expense of the general public.

Critics of mandatory remedial education argue that institutions of higher learning should provide the student only with "advisory placement" services. It is the student who ultimately decides and has the "right to fail" (Rounds and Andersen 1985). The student would be advised whether or not he/she needs remediation and would then be given the option to take the necessary remedial courses. These critics believe students are mature enough to be able to make the proper decision and should be allowed the freedom to do so. Adherents to this philosophy believe such a process promotes responsibility.

Proposals for Success

Students in need of remediation should not be overburdened with excessive course loads that would lead to further frustration and failure. Academic course loads should be limited and sequential in nature until remediation is completed and the student's basic skills deficiencies ameliorated.

The policy of giving students the right to fail has been tried and was shown to be ineffective. It is time to abandon this approach and to help our students succeed rather than to provide them with a failure-oriented approach to higher education.

Carlos Heredia, in a recent article in *Community Review* (1991-92), cites the poor performance of minority group students at the City University of New York (CUNY). He attributes their poor performance to a lack of "socialization in hard school work," to their deficiencies in reading and writing abilities and to their minimal learning skills. CUNY is by no means unique in this regard. The problems faced by CUNY students are mirrored by a significant proportion of their peers in other institutions as well.

Unless colleges are committed to intensive remedial and developmental programs to ameliorate these skills deficiencies, admission to an institution of higher education will do little to overcome the problems facing the remedial student. While virtually all community and senior colleges offer remedial programs, many of these programs are fractionated, uncoordinated and voluntary, or are not in the main stream of college offerings.

It is the colleges' responsibility to provide students with open access to higher education and with an equal opportunity to achieve excellence in their educational endeavors. To help ensure success, colleges need to incorporate mandatory testing and placement of students into remedial programs if

necessary and to move remedial course offerings into the mainstream of the college curriculum. The remedial student is probably best served if the remedial courses are offered as an integrated component of the content courses rather than in isolation in a separate department, or as a prerequisite to typical college courses.

The concept of integrated remedial programs within the regular college curriculum, as contrasted with separate mandatory remedial programs requiring completion prior to entrance into regular liberal arts programming, is a major philosophical issue today. Depending upon the degree of remediation needed by the student, there is no reason the offering of a combined program of study cannot be implemented. The remedial student would start with the necessary remedial courses and would, in addition, take selected entry-level liberal arts courses such as art, music, public speaking or health education. Taking these classes simultaneously with selected remedial courses would allow the student to make substantive progress towards obtaining his/her goals and improving self-confidence and, at the same time, would help eliminate basic skills deficiencies.

Prospects for the Future

At many institutions there is little connection between material learned in the remedial courses and content presented in the regular academic courses. Even if the student has gained mastery of certain basic skills as a result of successful completion of remedial courses, these skills are soon lost due to a lack of continued reinforcement in the traditional academic courses. To minimize this effect attempts were made to integrate the reinforcement of basic learning skills into content courses (Hoban 1983).

Students who successfully complete remedial courses are placed into regular academic content courses taught by faculty specially trained in the implementation of integrated skills reinforcement techniques. These faculty emphasize continuing the development of the aural, oral, reading and writing abilities of the students. It is believed these students will have increased exposure to continued reinforcement of the basic skills acquired in the remedial courses through continued emphasis of these skills in their regular academic courses (Anderson et al. 1983). This approach is proving to be highly successful in maintaining the newly developed skills of the students. The authors can attest to this, having implemented these Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) Strategies into a one-year Human Anatomy and Physiology course taught at Kingsborough Community College. In an attempt to maintain students' skills and improve their success rate in biology, we have developed a series of reinforcement strategies designed to help improve student skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking. These strategies include brief oral presentations, the preparation of a series of brief writing assignments based upon the journal literature in the discipline, a term paper based upon a library research project, weekly summaries of the lecture topics and a series of homework assignments emphasizing vocabulary and reading.

Kingsborough Community College is an urban community college located in Brooklyn, New York. The entering minority student population constitutes 48% of the freshman class. Approximately 85% of the student population is required to enroll in at least one or more remedial courses (Fox, 1992). These statistics are similar to those found in most urban community colleges. Results of the implementation of these ISR strategies indicate remedial students enrolled in the human A&P courses in which ISR skills have been implemented had a higher success rate than did their counterparts (Markus, 1988; Zeitlin, 1988).

Efforts at remediation have been met with varying degrees of success. Additional methods are needed, and remediation, developmental education programs and other teaching/learning approaches must be looked at with new insight. Also, differences in learning styles, gender differences and other related factors require far more detailed study.

The successful remedial programs previously described are evidence to the fact they do work, and if instituted properly are successful in improving the skills of the remedial student.

According to Arthur Cohen (1984), there is a continued shift toward implementation of remedial programs to retain students and to help them achieve success with post-secondary education. The state of New Jersey has implemented mandatory assessment and placement of students into remedial programs where needed in all of its institutions of higher learning. In its report on the effectiveness of remedial programs, the New Jersey Basic Skills Council (1983) recommended that:

students who need remediation and do not enroll in an appropriate program, have a small chance of succeeding at college. Failure to enroll identified students in needed remedial courses in view of the data available is a disservice to those students.

There are those who believe an alternate possibility for the future would be to reintroduce more highly selective admissions criteria in all of the nations colleges. This would probably widen the existing gap in our society between the literate and the illiterate, the societally advantaged and the societally disadvantaged. The numbers of minority group and other disadvantaged individuals are rising in this country. If admissions standards are further restricted the result would be to widen the gap between "the haves and the have-nots." Doing so, would further exacerbate the severe societal problems facing our nation. If these problems are ignored, we would be creating, intentionally or otherwise, a dichotomy of classes. Such a dichotomy is hardly in keeping with the hopes and purposes of democratic principles and egalitarian education.

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