

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Expanding Promise: Students Needing Academic Support

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Background

In 2021, College Promise and ETS welcomed Promise practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and other stakeholders from diverse sectors (e.g., workforce, social services, health, and finance) into national design teams to describe the ecosystems of support needed by 5 different students needing academic support: first-generation students, students needing academic support, students aged-out of foster care, students with disabilities, and student parents. This brief highlights the work of the design team on students needing academic support. Importantly, the design team for

students needing academic support recognized the intersectionality between and among the five student populations, such that by providing tailored academic supports, institutions and their community partners would also be increasing educational opportunity for the other groups often left to mitigate seemingly insurmountable unmet needs on their own.

Introduction

Upon entering college, many students face challenges, such as navigating a complex environment with new requirements, balancing school with family and/or work obligations, and making sure they are adequately academically prepared for college-level work¹. Before beginning coursework, students are typically required to take a series of assessments to gauge their academic preparation. Often referred to as placement tests, these assessments seek to indicate the level of coursework that students are prepared for. Between academic years 2011–12 and 2016–17, nearly 60% of students at public two-year institutions and 32% of students at public four-year institutions needed remedial coursework because they lacked academic preparedness for college-level work[1]. Contributing to this high enrollment in developmental education is the lack of alignment between the K–12 and higher education systems [2] [3] [4]; poor academic advising [5]; and a lack of social and academic support [6], which can increase the cost of college and become a financial burden for students who are academically underprepared [7][8]. Students who face academic challenges or who are academically underprepared have disproportionately higher tuition costs due to spending more time in college [9], contributing to a cycle that makes it all the more challenging for them to succeed.

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¹ Throughout this document, we use “developmental education,” “remedial coursework,” and “remediation” interchangeably, and we imply no negative or positive connotation with the use of any one of the phrases.

The student population for remedial courses is disproportionately low-income and minority students. Specifically, for students who began college in 2011-12, 63% of Hispanic students and 67% of Black students enrolled at public 2-year colleges took remedial coursework by 2016-17, compared to 54% of White students. At public 4-year universities, 41% of Hispanic students and 39% of Black students took remedial coursework, compared to 28% of White students.

It is unfortunate that developmental education programs produce decidedly mixed results [10]. While developmental education programs are designed to improve students' academic preparation for college-level, credit-bearing coursework in math, reading, and writing, only 20% of students who complete developmental coursework go on to enroll in the next college-level courses within two years [11]. The cost of developmental education is a major topic of scrutiny, particularly given questions on its effectiveness [12]. Credits in developmental education account for nearly 10% of all credits earned at community colleges nationwide, costing an estimated \$4 billion per year [13]. Furthermore, taxpayers contribute an estimated \$7 million per year in the form of loans and grants to cover costs related to developmental education [14]. Inconsistent evidence of effectiveness and high costs of developmental education has led to institutions increasingly making the coursework optional.

For the purposes of this brief, we offer a brief summary of our recommended strategies to improve developmental education, beginning with reforms of assessments and placement mechanisms. In making recommendations, we consider the increasingly diverse population of students who will have access to postsecondary education as a result of College Promise programs.



Placement Testing

Issue: Placement tests are often a focal point of legislative reform for developmental education. An overreliance on such tests has led to students being inappropriately placed into lower levels of coursework when they could be successful in college-level courses [15] [16]. While students can take the test again, [17], doing so may present logistical and financial challenges. Placement tests may require a fee and also come at a cost to students in the form of time (i.e., time spent commuting to a testing site and preparing for a test) [18], which not all students can afford.

Recommendation: We recommend replacing placement tests with multiple measures to determine academic preparation (see [19] (2019) for an example). Multiple measures typically include students' high school GPA and previous standardized tests, if any, [20] and may also include grades in selected high school coursework and noncognitive measures.



Intake/Onboarding/Orientation

Issue: Some institutions may require students to enroll in “student success courses” designed to teach non-cognitive skills such as time management, note-taking, goal setting, studying, major selection, and resumé writing [21].

Recommendation: Instead of requiring students to complete student-success courses, we recommend that institutions implement a robust pre-enrollment onboarding/orientation that teaches successful habits, provides an overview of major-specific and institutional requirements, and emphasizes the college's commitment to providing support services.

Academic Support Services

Issue: Students seeking academic support services may feel stigmatized. This is especially true for students from historically underrepresented groups [22]. This is important, considering the correlation between academic self-efficacy and academic performance [23].

Recommendation: Alter the introduction to academic support services to ensure services are destigmatized and associated with a growth mindset and success-oriented perspective. Consider creating comprehensive college transition programs, which support underserved students academically and socially as they transition to college, helping to ensure academically validating experiences [24].

Modalities

Issue: Students placed into or needing developmental education may spend critical time and money on developmental course sequences before enrolling in college-level classes, and many students fail to complete such sequences [8].

Recommendation: We recommend that institutions follow co-requisite developmental education models. These models eliminate the requirement that students complete developmental work in a separate term before taking college-level courses.

Guided Pathways for STEM vs. Non-STEM Majors

Issue: Students needing academic support, who are not interested in STEM-related majors, are often placed in the same course sequences as STEM majors or other math-oriented majors.

Recommendation: Provide alternate guided pathways for students who may not need traditional course sequences that prepare them for algebra-based pathways. These alternate pathways may include courses in quantitative reasoning, statistics, or financial literacy.

Professional Development and Training

Issue: As developmental education becomes less frequently required, more students who are viewed as academically underprepared enroll in college-level courses without having taken developmental coursework.

Recommendation: Faculty need to be trained to offer andragogy-centered approaches to education that serve academically underprepared students.

Collaboration and Communication

Issue: In implementing changes or legislative reforms, institutions may be “siloed” or isolated from one another and thus miss opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another on common issues and challenges. This can lead to a duplication of efforts, unnecessary funds spent on ineffective practices, and/or reinventing the wheel.

Recommendation: Foster collaboration and communication across departments, across institutions, and within college systems through comprehensive and integrated programs [25]. This collaboration and communication can even be extended to colleges’ surrounding communities and local K–12 institutions, and it may include regularly held meetings, data sharing, and training.

Conclusion

While this brief offers a summary of the recommendations for institutions, the full chapter presents a more robust description of the strategies and recommendations designed to improve the landscape of developmental education and the experiences of students needing academic support.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

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Please see the following for a full copy of the report:

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