

Developmental Education

Most broad-access two- and four-year colleges offer developmental coursework—often referred to as remediation—in math, writing, and reading. While developmental courses do not count toward a college degree, students must pay tuition or apply their financial aid to enroll in them. Traditionally, students are referred to these courses based on scores on standardized placement tests administered by their college, and referred students are required to complete these courses before taking college-level math and English.

States, systems, and institutions are experimenting with ways to better target developmental education, shorten the time students spend in developmental education, and improve curriculum and instruction. Early popular reforms to developmental education, such as learning communities and summer bridge programs, showed short-term improvements but did not result in longer-term effects on student outcomes. Recent rigorous research points to several promising approaches with more sustained effects.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

Developmental education is widely used and may have detrimental effects on some students.

- Among those who first enrolled in college in 2013, almost two thirds of public two-year students and one third of public four-year students took at least one developmental course. Black, Latinx, and low-income students are placed into developmental education courses at higher rates than White and higher-income students.¹
- Many students referred to developmental education do not go on to complete college-level courses. The problem is most acute in mathematics; one study found that only 20% of community college students referred to developmental math enrolled in a developmental course and then went on to pass college-level mathematics.²
- Causal studies of remediation have shown that developmental education has negative impacts on college-level course completion and credit accrual for students near the cut-point used on standardized tests to assign students to developmental courses.³
- Placement practices and policies that assign too many students to developmental education have been shown to inhibit student success.⁴

States and institutions are reforming developmental education, but reforms have yet to fully take hold.

- Over half of states now mandate or recommend that broad-access colleges reform the way they assess students' college readiness or change the sequencing and structure of developmental courses.⁵
- Among the most popular reforms are:
 - Multiple measures placement: using additional and alternative measures (e.g., high school GPA, previous academic coursework and performance) to place students into either developmental or college-level courses

- Corequisite remediation: instead of enrolling in prerequisite developmental courses, having students enroll in introductory college-level math or English courses coupled with a developmental class or other academic supports
- Math pathways: using streamlined sequences of courses to increase access to college-level mathematics and teach students math skills relevant to their degree requirements and programs of study
- Scaling reformed approaches requires garnering stakeholder buy in, reconfiguring staffing and scheduling, and providing professional development for faculty and advisors.⁶
- Without full-scale adoption, limited access to these reforms may exacerbate racial inequities.⁷

Emerging rigorous evidence points to the promise of these approaches to improving student outcomes.

- A study of multiple measures placement in seven State University of New York community colleges found that it resulted in more students assigned to college-level courses. Most important, it led to an increase in the number of students passing college-level courses.⁸
- An evaluation of corequisite English in five Texas community colleges found that being assigned to a corequisite course instead of a traditional prerequisite course increased the probability of passing Composition I and later English courses.⁹
- A study of a corequisite course in statistics in the City University of New York found that students assigned to it had higher graduation rates.¹⁰
- A study at four community colleges in Texas found that math pathways reforms helped students pass developmental and college-level math at higher rates.¹¹
- Research on Florida legislation that allows many students to bypass developmental education found that more students completed introductory college-level courses and that achievement gaps by race were narrowed.¹²

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY

- **Incentivizing the implementation of evidence-based practices.** Federal programs administered through the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) could provide funding for postsecondary institutions to adopt evidence-based developmental education reforms.
- **Supporting information dissemination and technical assistance.** States, accreditation agencies, and intermediaries provide incentives, policy directives, and training to institutions to implement developmental education reforms. Federal guidance and financial support to these entities may further accelerate the adoption of evidence-based practices at postsecondary institutions.

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Endnotes

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