

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## REMEDIAL COURSES IN COLLEGE STIR QUESTIONS OVER COST, EFFECTIVENESS

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November 17, 2014

### Lower Ed

The number of undergraduate students taking high-school-level courses has risen dramatically in the past decade, and they are using an increasing share of their college financial aid before they log any college credits.

Pell grants awarded to undergraduate students taking at least one remedial course\*

2011-12

**\$4.60 billion**

1999-00

**\$0.96**

Undergraduate students taking at least one remedial education course

2011-12

**2.70 million**

1999-00

**1.04**

\*In 2014 dollars

Source: Education Department

The Wall Street Journal

College students are increasingly spending federal financial aid and taking on debt for high school-level courses that don't count toward a degree, despite mounting evidence the courses are ineffective and may contribute to higher dropout rates.

The number of college students taking at least one remedial course rose to 2.7 million in the 2011-2012 academic year from 1.04 million in 1999-2000, federal data show. During the same span, the amount of federal grants spent by undergraduates enrolled in at least one remedial course rose 380%, after inflation, Education Department figures show. There was also a drastic rise in remedial students taking on student debt

The trends reflect a sharp rise over the past decade in enrollment at community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income, minority and older populations. About 40% of students entering community colleges enroll in at least one remedial course, according to the Education Department; only about 1 in 4 of them will earn a degree or certificate.

"You clearly see that a big part of the problem is that students of color, first-generation students in low socioeconomic status are getting stuck" in remedial courses, said Eloy Oakley, president of Long Beach City College in Southern California. "They're getting placed in these courses and they're not coming out."

Students are typically placed in remedial courses for English and math and because they score poorly on standardized tests. Federal law permits them to spend financial aid on as much as a year's worth of remediation.

Now, the high dropout rate among remedial-education students – along with a sharp rise in student debt – is fueling debate about whether the government should be more stringent in awarding student aid. Critics – ranging from some think-tank academics and conservatives to a trustee of a community-college system in Texas – say aid should be targeted toward students who are better-prepared.

At the same time, academics and senior officials within the Education Department increasingly view the remedial courses themselves as a major barrier to college completion, particularly among minorities. Many students become discouraged and could succeed without remediation, while others could benefit from shorter, more-targeted catch-up sessions, research shows.

Multiple studies have concluded that, for most students, remediation either hurts or has no effect on their odds of earning a college degree or certificate. The studies have compared the outcomes of borderline students – those just above and just below the cutoff for getting into college-level courses. In a 2012 National Bureau of Economic Research paper, two Columbia University researchers found that students who appeared to have been misplaced in remediation were 8% more likely to drop out than those who went directly into college courses.

Some critics say schools should do away with open enrollment to steer more aid toward students who are college-ready and much more likely to graduate.

“If somebody is reading and doing math at a middle-school level, they are not going to succeed at a college, and we should stop pretending otherwise,” said Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative-leaning Washington-based think tank that focuses on education policy.

The amount of federal Pell grants – the federal aid program for modest-income Americans – awarded to remedial-education students, in today’s dollars, has more than quadrupled since the 1999-2000 academic year, amounting to \$4.6 billion in 2011-2012. That reflected 14% of all Pell grant aid.

Some congressional lawmakers in the past have backed tighter restrictions on federal aid being used for remedial education.

But others say remedial education, while in need of an overhaul, is necessary to provide the opportunity for many Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their career prospects. Research has shown that some form of remediation might benefit the least-prepared students. “We want individuals to be as educated as possible in order to be productive in the economy and the workforce,” Mr. Oakley said.

The Obama administration believes remediation courses, as currently designed, are among the biggest obstacles to its goal of increasing the number of Americans with postsecondary degrees. The administration this year gave \$10 million to a partnership of Columbia University, the Community College Research Center and the research group MDRC to fund a research center to study ways to overhaul remedial education.

States, meanwhile, are experimenting with ways to improve the success of remedial-education students. Florida has scrapped mandatory remedial education for students who test poorly and instead allows them to choose for themselves whether to take

developmental courses. Other states, such as Virginia, have broken up remedial classes into smaller, more-specified segments so students can complete them sooner.

Long Beach City College is experimenting with how it assesses students and places them in remedial classes. Before 2012, it placed all students based on how they scored on a standardized test. Since then, the school has launched a program to place students from local high schools based on their grade-point averages, which officials believe are a better predictor of how students will perform in college-level courses.

Within the program, the share of first-year students at LBCC going directly into college-level coursework has tripled, to 39% for English and 32% for math. And the school finds that on average, students who would have been slated for remediation are performing as well as others.

Leangkheng Ouk, 20 years old, was slated to take remedial English and math at the school because she performed poorly on her standardized test, despite being a B student in high school. Under the new system, she went directly into college-level courses in 2012 and earned a 3.8 GPA before transferring this year. She now attends California State University, Long Beach, where she is on track to earn a bachelor's degree in business management.

"I was glad they placed me in the higher courses actually on my level, so I don't waste time and can be able to transfer in two years," said Ms. Ouk, a Cambodian national and U.S. permanent resident who is the first member of her family to go to college. Ms. Ouk has used scholarship money, federal aid and wages earned from a part-time job to cover her education. "If I was placed in a remedial class I would have to stay in LBCC longer. I would have used my financial aid grants."