

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

COLLEGES RETHINK REMEDIAL EDUCATION TO GET STUDENTS ON COURSE TO GRADUATION

States are scrapping traditional remediation classes after finding they fail to move students closer to college degrees

By Douglas Belkin
September 27, 2017

More states are moving away from remedial education, finding the noncredit classes are **more of a detour** than an on-ramp to a college degree.

The classes, typically assigned to first-year students who fail a basic readiness test, are designed to bolster their knowledge base on core academic subjects. The courses cost students and institutions roughly \$7 billion a year. But studies show that teacher preparation for remedial courses is often weak, student motivation is low and pass rates are even lower.

The California State University System, the largest public system in the country, recently decided to scrap traditional remediation classes, joining Colorado, Indiana, Tennessee, West Virginia and Florida in **moving to rethink the system**.

"No one has been very happy with [the remedial system] for a while," said Lynn Mahoney, provost and vice president for academic affairs at California State University, Los Angeles. "We've been nibbling around the edges to fix this. Now, we're going to start a new approach."

Next fall, instead of remedial classes, Cal State Los Angeles students who fail the assessment test will simultaneously take college-level and new basic skills classes, which Dr. Mahoney said will help fill in the holes for less-prepared students as they need it.

Only 37 percent of American 12th-graders were academically prepared for college math and reading in 2015, according to the **latest available National Assessment of Educational Progress**, known as the "Nation's Report Card."

Each of the 23 campuses in the California State University System will give its own twist to the basic skills classes. At Cal State Los Angeles, courses will be targeted at students' college-credit classes. For example, if a student is taking a sociology class and needs help with statistics, he or she would only learn the math applicable for that class. A typical remedial course would cover much more ground, said Dr. Mahoney.

The push to shake up remedial education has been gaining momentum across the country as universities struggle to improve anemic graduation rates – often dragged down by the same students most in need of help.

For the class of students who started in 2009, the six-year graduation rate across the California State University System was 66 percent for students who didn't need any

remedial classes. It was 45 percent for those who took remedial classes in both math and English.

Low success rates for students who need remedial classes is an even more pronounced problem at community colleges, where nearly two thirds of students are placed in at least one remedial class but fewer than one in five pass the germane college course, according to the Columbia University's Community College Research Center.

Students are assigned to remedial classes based on assessment tests, but those results are frequently faulty and can flag the wrong students, said Hunter Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education and a professor of education at Appalachian State University.

He added that the courses are typically taught by the least-experienced teachers, with little training in remedial-teaching methods. And because classes don't carry college credit, students feel they are wasting money – and, in some case, using up limited financial aid – for courses that don't move them closer to a degree.

The issue echoes beyond the halls of academia into the workforce. The [skills gap in the U.S.](#) has led to several million unfilled jobs. Most of those demand some sort of postsecondary education, according to [research from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce](#).

"If we're going to address the labor issue, we're going to have to tap into the American underclass," said Mr. Boylan. "But that class is not well-prepared for college, so we're going to have to provide them with some sort of academic development."

The basic skills model that the California State University System is poised to embrace has shown some promise. Colorado, Indiana, Tennessee and West Virginia have all reported improving pass rates.

One study of 13 community colleges in Tennessee found that only about 15 percent of students enrolled in remedial math classes went on to finish their first college math course the following semester. But nearly 60 percent of students who took a basic skills class at the same time as a college math class, often supplemented with tutoring, completed the college class.

The study found that the [basic skills model to be more cost-effective](#), but added that "it does cost more" and "requires substantially more resources."

"It's a high-risk, high-reward strategy," said Clive Belfield, an economics professor at Queens College, City University of New York and the lead author of the Tennessee study. "It's expensive – you're paying for two courses instead of one – so it has to work. And, it turns out, it does."

Students' costs will remain about the same, but they could potentially save money over time by increasing the speed and likelihood of graduating, according to Dr. Mahoney, of Cal State Los Angeles.

She said she believes the new approach won't cost the school additional money.

"We haven't budgeted it out yet, but I spend a fortune on remedial education and that doesn't count toward a degree," Dr. Mahoney said. "I don't think this will cost me much extra."