

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF ■ WINTER 2008-2009

IMPROVING STUDENT SUCCESS BY STRENGTHENING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: THE ROLE OF STATE POLICY

Derek V. Price and Brandon Roberts¹

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for
America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, more than one out of four American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.²

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Mott foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:
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Community colleges are key institutions where low-income students of all ages can pursue postsecondary education and obtain credentials. In 2005-06, the last year data are available, community college enrollments accounted for almost half (47 percent) of all public college students at degree-granting institutions.³

Estimates suggest that 60 percent of first-time community college students who enroll directly from high school do not have the basic academic skills needed to successfully complete college-level courses.⁴ These numbers could be even higher if enrolled working adults were included. Overall, far too many enrolled students are at risk of failing and thus contribute to low community college retention and graduation rates.

Community colleges address the low academic skills of students by offering courses below college level in basic academic skill areas such as English and Math. This is typically referred to as developmental education. While these courses represent a significant effort to help students gain important college and work skills, community colleges report that more than 60 percent of their students spend at least one year completing developmental coursework.⁵ Still, a significant number of developmental education students never earn the academic skills needed for college courses. For example, a recent analysis of progress through developmental education at Achieving the Dream⁶ colleges found that less than 40 percent of students who are referred to developmental education courses complete the entire sequence of courses to which they are referred, and almost half fail to complete their first developmental course.⁷

President Barack Obama recently called for all Americans to have at least one year of education beyond high school and to restore the United States as the country with the highest percentage of adults with postsecondary credentials. This

necessitates significant improvements in postsecondary student success rates. A key target for improvement is community college developmental education students. This policy brief examines this issue and presents a number of policy recommendations that states can pursue to increase the success and credential attainment of developmental education students.

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT (WFPF) supports efforts of state nonprofit organizations to strengthen state policies that can help low-income workers achieve economic security and become productive participants in the economy. WFPF encourages state groups to address the issue of postsecondary student success and particularly the problems associated with developmental education. States that want – and need – to increase the education and skills of their workforce should focus on improving the success rates of developmental education students. After all, these students have demonstrated a commitment to pursue postsecondary education. A few states, including several with WFPF project partners, are in the forefront of improving their approach to developmental education. This policy brief describes these efforts and presents specific recommendations for improvement.

IMPROVING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION TO MEET FUTURE WORKFORCE NEEDS

The challenge for states and community colleges is considerable: to develop systems that help students successfully transition through developmental education courses into college credit programs without negatively affecting student persistence, choice of major and labor market opportunities.⁸

National data underscore the challenges community colleges face helping students earn postsecondary credentials. Analysis from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for the National Center of Education Statistics shows that less than 25 percent of students who began at a community college in 2001 earned an associate degree within three years.⁹ Analysis of a nationally-representative cohort of

beginning postsecondary students in 1995-96 found that slightly more than one-third (36 percent) of students who enrolled in a community college as their first postsecondary institution completed either a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree within six years; another 22 percent were still enrolled in college somewhere, and 42 percent were not enrolled and did not have a formal degree or certificate.¹⁰ As suggested earlier, the challenges of persistence and completion are even greater for students who begin college in developmental education.

Poor student success rates combined with demographic factors illustrate the significant challenges facing the United States to prepare its future workforce: roughly 60 percent of the 51 million projected new jobs during the next decade are the result of retiring baby boomers (adults 55 years of age and higher); however, this group of working adults at least 55 years of age is also expected to grow faster than the population of adults 16 years of age and higher.¹¹ In other words, the working adult population is growing older, which means that future workers are more likely to come from adults already in the workforce. As we have written previously, the population of adults at least 25 years of age represents almost two-thirds of the 2020 workforce.¹² Moreover, this population of working adults requires significant improvement in their skills to adequately compete for 21st century jobs.

Estimates of the growing need for workers with higher skills abound: a recent report suggests that, barring significant changes in educational attainment, the United States will fall 16 million postsecondary degrees short of the number needed to match leading nations and thus meet America's workforce needs of 2025.¹³ Another study claims that high skilled jobs that require a postsecondary credential will make up almost half of all job growth over the next decade.¹⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 22 of the 30 fastest growing occupations over the next decade typically require at least a postsecondary vocational certificate or associate degree; these occupations are expected to grow by 27 percent between 2006 and 2016, a much higher rate than the average for

all occupations.¹⁵

Improving developmental education at community colleges is a critical part of a national solution to enhance the skills and credentials of workers to meet the demands of the 21st century labor market. States have an important responsibility to recognize this need and to take action for improvement. State policymakers who want to stimulate and support improvements in developmental education should consider the following policy areas:

- ◆ Reimbursement rates for developmental education courses;
- ◆ Assessment instruments used to place students in developmental education;
- ◆ Rules that limit developmental education students from taking college-level courses concurrently;
- ◆ Availability of support services for developmental education students;
- ◆ New ways of contextualizing curriculum by integrating academic skills with occupational programs;
- ◆ Alternative delivery of programs (e.g., Career Pathways, bridges) to accelerate the transition from developmental education to college-level courses;
- ◆ Improved data systems to allow tracking and reporting of developmental education students throughout the postsecondary system;
- ◆ Incentive funding for community colleges who successfully transition developmental students to college-level courses; and,
- ◆ Time limits on financial aid eligibility.

REIMBURSEMENT RATES: A significant revenue source for community colleges is state appropriations, which are typically based on complex formulas related to FTEs (i.e., full-time equivalent enrollments). These funding formulas are often referred to as the “reimbursement rates.” Most states provide more funds per student for academic, credit-based courses than for

developmental education courses. This lower funding creates a problem for community colleges, because the cost of providing the kinds of instruction and support services needed for developmental students to succeed is significantly higher than state reimbursement rates. In other words, states are investing fewer resources for developmental education students than for other community college students. This situation is especially troubling given that a majority of community college students need developmental education courses to become college- and work-ready.

ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS: Students entering college are tested to determine their readiness to do college-level work. These tests or assessment instruments generate problems for developmental education students, because they vary considerably across different colleges. For example, in California more than 80 assessment instruments are used across 109 community colleges to determine if a student needs to enroll in developmental education courses. Another problem with assessment instruments is that thresholds used to place students in developmental education courses are not uniformly applied; this means that a student with similarly measured skills may be directed to developmental courses at one college while at another college could enroll in college-level courses. This inconsistent assignment of students to developmental education creates a significant, and potentially unnecessary, obstacle to success in college.

CONCURRENT COURSE-TAKING: A third obstacle facing developmental education is rules that limit the kinds of courses students can take. Indiana, for example, does not allow community college students to attempt college-level courses until they have passed all parts of the assessment test. Thus a student who placed in a developmental math course is blocked from taking a college-level general education course even if that course does not have a math pre-requisite. These types of rules are especially troubling, because evidence suggests that students who co-enroll in developmental courses and college-level courses can succeed in

both courses, and complete the developmental sequence more quickly.¹⁶ Put another way, the freedom to simultaneously take college-level courses allows developmental education students to make real progress toward a postsecondary degree or credential by accumulating college credits.

SUPPORT SERVICES: A related challenge is the availability of support services for students enrolled in developmental education courses. Unfortunately, few colleges have dedicated funds to provide academic and social support services to students, and federal programs such as TRIO¹⁷ are not available at all colleges. Moreover, academic and student support services are considered non-revenue generating because state reimbursement rates seldom take into account the availability or utilization of these services. A bigger obstacle is getting students who need academic and social support services to take advantage of them. According to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 41 percent of community college students report that their institution provides very little support to help them cope with non-academic responsibilities; moreover, between one-third and one-half of students rarely or never use skills labs (math, writing), peer tutoring, academic advising or career counseling.¹⁸

CONTEXTUALIZATION: Too often, low-skilled adults who attempt developmental education courses independently from occupational programs or other general education college courses become disillusioned and their doubts about college are reinforced.¹⁹ Researchers and practitioners are beginning to understand that combining academic course work with applied subject matter such as occupational material can more effectively engage students.²⁰ The best contextualized practices combine the blending of basic skills and practical content with new teaching practices (such as case studies, project-based learning, and other student-centered practices), and regularly assess on how knowledge is applied and skills are transferred.²¹ These approaches can help colleges more effectively transition low-skilled adults into certificate and degree programs.

DELIVERY: Another obstacle for community colleges

is the extent to which state policy limits innovation in the way developmental education courses are packaged and delivered. For example, community colleges that offer developmental education via modularized shorter-term courses do not typically receive state funding for these courses because the courses do not meet minimum requirements of “seat-time” (i.e., instructional hours) to generate reimbursement revenue.

DATA SYSTEMS: In many cases, states do not have accurate data on the number or percentage of students who enroll in developmental education courses at community colleges and successfully transition to college-level courses, much less the percentage of such students who earn postsecondary certificates or degrees. Before policymakers can successfully address the limitations of developmental education programs, they need better information on the extent of this problem and clear metrics by which to assess progress.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES: Another challenge for improving the success rates of developmental students is that colleges do not have a financial incentive to help students pass developmental education courses. In most states, reimbursement rates for community colleges are based on enrollment levels as of a certain “census” date each term. In effect, colleges receive state resources based on who is enrolled at a particular time rather than if students successfully complete their courses. Even when performance-based funding is used by states, the resources are typically too small to change institutional behavior. Moreover, this type of funding is often considered supplemental and is the first to be cut when states face budgetary shortfalls.

FINANCIAL AID: Students who require developmental education courses also face financial disincentives because of time limits on financial aid eligibility. Most states follow federal rules that limit financial aid to 150 percent of the official time needed to complete an associate degree; in practice, this means that students who take developmental courses can use up their state and federal financial aid eligibility before earning enough credits to

obtain a postsecondary credential. States do not have to follow federal rules, and could offer supplemental grant aid or performance-incentive scholarships for students who successfully complete developmental education.

Taking state policy actions in one or more of these areas could yield effective institutional changes that improve opportunities for developmental education students to succeed at community colleges. A few states, such as California, Washington and Illinois are in the midst of finding solutions to these types of policy barriers. These efforts are described below.

EXAMPLES FROM STATES

In California, the Community College Chancellor's Office launched the Basic Skills Initiative to encourage colleges to implement effective practices that can increase the success rates of developmental education students. Approximately \$30 million annually was made available to community colleges throughout California that developed plans to implement or expand effective practices in developmental education as documented in an extensive report by the Center for Student Success and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges.²² One of the effective practices recommended in this report is that "a comprehensive system of support services exists, and is characterized by a high degree of integration among academic and student support services."

In Washington, the state community and technical college system launched the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training program (I-BEST) at 10 colleges pairing adult basic education or English as second language instructors in the classroom with occupational instructors to help students obtain basic and occupational skills. This contextualized approach to developmental education was evaluated and revealed dramatic differences in the success rate of I-BEST students; by 2007, I-BEST was expanded to all 34 community and technical colleges. Significantly, the state legislature authorized a higher FTE

reimbursement rate for I-BEST programs, thus providing the resources to support this new approach.²³

Illinois, as part of its Shifting Gears²⁴ initiative, is working to expand bridge programs throughout the community college system to improve the transition of adults with low academic skills into high-demand occupational programs. Several important policy changes are under development: the community college system is approving and codifying a new delivery approach to developmental education (i.e. bridge programs) and is changing the course reimbursement system to support state-approved bridge programs. In addition, efforts are underway to strengthen an already sophisticated data system to add more metrics on student progress and transitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATES TO IMPROVE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION POLICIES

States face many challenges if they want to address the significant developmental education needs of students at community colleges; however, they must address these issues if the U.S. is to regain its position as the country with the most highly educated workforce. State policy has an important role to play in guiding and supporting improvements in the developmental education efforts of community colleges. The bottom line is that state policy should fund developmental education at levels that reflect the instructional and student support needs of its students. At the same time, community colleges need to change the way developmental education programs are packaged and delivered so students do not linger in these courses indefinitely.

We recommend the following policy changes:

- ◆ Implement state data systems and reporting requirements so colleges can track the number and percentage of developmental students who transition to college-level courses and who eventually earn a postsecondary degree or certificate.

- ◆ Identify a single assessment instrument for statewide use across all community colleges with clearly defined thresholds for placement into developmental courses.
- ◆ Allow students to enroll in college-level courses concurrently with developmental courses if pre-requisites are met for the college-level classes.
- ◆ Increase reimbursement rates to community colleges so they can offer wrap-around support services along with revamped instructional practices (such as contextualization) for developmental courses.
- ◆ Provide performance-based funding incentives for community colleges that successfully transition developmental education students to college-level courses and postsecondary credentials.
- ◆ Provide innovation funds for community colleges to pilot alternative models for developmental education courses, such as bridge programs or Career Pathways, that are geared toward transitioning students with low academic skills into college-level courses and high-demand occupational fields.
- ◆ Change financial aid eligibility rules for developmental education students so state financial aid resources do not run out for students who are required to take developmental education courses.

None of these policy solutions by themselves are a panacea that will change developmental education overnight. However, the increasing demand for developmental education courses at community colleges indicates that significant changes must be made in the way state policy supports – and community colleges provide – developmental education in order to improve postsecondary education attainment. Addressing data reporting practices, assessment policies, funding formulas and financial aid are four areas that could yield dividends for policymakers who want to see more community college students earn postsecondary credentials.

WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

States should consider the following policy changes to improve developmental education:

- 1) Implement state data systems and reporting requirements
- 2) Identify a single assessment instrument for statewide use across all community colleges
- 3) Allow students to enroll in college-level courses concurrently with developmental courses
- 4) Increase reimbursement rates to community colleges
- 5) Provide performance-based funding incentives for community colleges
- 6) Provide innovation funds for community colleges to pilot alternative models for developmental education courses
- 7) Change financial aid eligibility rules for developmental education students

For questions about this policy brief or the
Working Poor Families Project contact:
Brandon Roberts
robert3@starpower.net
(301) 657-1480

ENDNOTES

¹ Derek V. Price is principal owner of DVP-PRAXIS LTD, a consulting firm focused on higher education and the workforce. He is considered a national leader in strategic thinking for institutional transformation and systems change, especially the use of data-driven strategies to improve program and organizational effectiveness. For more information, see <http://www.dvp-praxis.org>. Brandon Roberts manages of the Working Poor Families Project. Thanks to Pamela Burdman, Davis Jenkins, Chris Mazzeo, Kay McClenney, and Deborah Povich for their comments and feedback.

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- ⁶ Achieving the Dream is a national initiative operating at 80 community colleges in 15 states; its goal is to help community colleges students succeed, especially students of color and low-income students. See www.achievingthedream.org
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- ¹⁵ Dohm and Shniper, 2007.
- ¹⁶ A program at Kingsborough Community College (City University of New York) that linked developmental English and a college-level course with a student success course in a learning community was found to accelerate the time for students to complete developmental course requirements, and to increase the number of credits developmental students earned. This program was evaluated through a rigorous experimental design method that randomly assigned some students to the learning community and other students to the more typical developmental courses. See Scrivener, et. al. 2008. *A Good Start: Two Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College*. New York, MDRC.
- ¹⁷ A group of federal programs funded by the Department of Education that provides resources directly to colleges to motivate and support first-generation students and those from low-income backgrounds. Two-thirds of program participants must be low-income and the first in their family to attend college. The most widely known program at colleges is Student Support Services (SSS).
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- ²³ Bridges to Opportunity Initiative, 2008. *A State Policy Guide for Community College Leaders*. Available at www.communitycollegecentral.com
- ²⁴ Shifting Gears is a Joyce Foundation initiative that seeks to strengthen state postsecondary and skills development systems and institutions in order to increase the number of adults with postsecondary credentials. The initiative currently operates in five Midwestern states: Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin.