

Setting Up Success in Developmental Education: How State Policy Can Help Community Colleges to Improve Student Outcomes

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Executive Summary

Earning a postsecondary credential has never been more critical to getting a job that pays family-supporting wages. Today's students, who understand the importance of education beyond high school, are enrolling in higher education—community colleges, in particular—at record rates. But too many of the students who enroll in community college are not on track for success. Six out of ten must take at least one developmental education course before they can enroll in college-level courses. This decreases their individual chances of ultimately earning a credential. Moreover, it compromises our global economic competitiveness when the nation's education attainment rate goes down.

The large number of students entering community college needing developmental education, combined with the low number of students who complete their developmental requirements and meet college-ready standards within the first academic year, have made this area an *Achieving the Dream* priority for influencing state policies.

Achieving the Dream, a national initiative to improve student success in community colleges, has taken a multipronged approach to improving outcomes in

developmental education. This issue brief describes how the fifteen participating states have concentrated their policy efforts on four key areas:

Prevention: States have a role to play in reducing the need for developmental education: setting and broadly communicating college-readiness standards; providing early assessment opportunities for high school students; and ensuring that high school and college entrance standards and expectations are aligned.

Assessment and Placement: A carefully thought-out placement-assessment policy is critical to improving developmental education outcomes. A state's approach to placement-assessment policies can make the difference between whether a student who cannot succeed without intervention is well-served. These policies also affect whether students slip through the cracks and are allowed to enroll in college-level courses with little probability for success. Poorly designed state placement-assessment policy can also result in students being placed in developmental education when supports and enrollment in college-level classes would serve them better.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Setting Up Success in Developmental Education was prepared by JFF for Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed (earn degrees, earn certificates, or transfer to other institutions to continue their studies).

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Implementation and Evaluation of Program Innovation: State policy can foster or impede experimentation and testing to find out what approaches to instruction and supports are effective in developmental education. States are able to provide support and resources for institutions to innovate and attempt new interventions. Limited evidence as to what works in developmental education, combined with large enrollments and the corresponding expense, suggest that states that are serious about improving outcomes should redouble efforts to identify new strategies and interventions that can increase student and institutional performance in developmental education.

Performance Measurement and Incentives: States have considerable influence over the performance indicators used to measure progress and the impact of state and institutional interventions. To improve outcomes, states and institutions should pay attention to intermediate measures and to milestones that developmental education students must pass en route to final success measures like graduation and transfer. Increasing knowledge of the relationship between intermediate measures and final success (e.g., graduation, transfer, and persistence toward a credential) can inform state incentives to help students meet shorter-term goals. Further, performance incentives can drive institutions to focus on helping their students meet state developmental education goals.

Each of these state-level strategies has merit. Together, they add up to a potentially powerful approach to improving outcomes for students in need of developmental education. Together, the strategies pinpoint problem areas, including the disconnect between K-12 and postsecondary education; spotty assessment and placement practices; and outdated, semester-based instructional delivery designs. The four strategies also address critical gaps in what is known to be effective in developmental education by improving performance indicators and testing and providing incentives to identify and implement new approaches to improvement.

Perhaps most important, sharing results and learning from the effective practices of high-performing institutions can begin to fill gaps in knowledge about what works in developmental education. State policy plays a critical role in developing the conditions to implement these strategies so that underprepared students can remedy their academic deficiencies and get on track to earning the credentials and degrees they need to support their families and contribute to our nation's economic vitality.