



OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE FOR DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE TEXAS SENATE
HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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Chairwoman Zaffirini and distinguished members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Higher Education Committee today to provide an overview on developmental education.

My name is Michael Collins, and I am a program director at Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based research, policy, and advocacy organization, where I co-direct *Achieving the Dream* and the *Developmental Education Initiative*—two national initiatives designed to increase the success of students in our nation’s community colleges. Both are generously funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with 18 regional and national funders.

ACHIEVING THE DREAM AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Jobs for the Future leads the state policy efforts in both of these initiatives. We support 16 states—including Texas—by working with community college system offices, departments of higher education, coordinating boards, and community college associations to inform the development of state-level policies that accelerate institutional efforts to improve success outcomes for community college students. In Texas the state lead organization is the Texas Association of Community Colleges, in partnership with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Launched in 2004, *Achieving the Dream* is focused on accelerating student progression through developmental education and college-credit courses—and ultimately toward credentials and degrees. The *Developmental Education Initiative*, launched in 2009, was created to develop and spread effective practices and policies from *Achieving the Dream*’s demonstration phase (2004-2009). Both initiatives place an emphasis on students who are low-income,

students of color, and those academically underprepared for success in higher education. Over 100 participating community colleges are each implementing innovative demonstrations and pilots to dramatically improve student outcomes. There are 25 *Achieving the Dream* colleges, four of which are also *Developmental Education Initiative* colleges.

SPOTLIGHT ON DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION AS A LEVER FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPLETION

In today’s economy, it is increasingly clear that a high school diploma isn’t enough to cross the threshold into the middle class. Some form of postsecondary training is required to have a reasonable chance of earning a family-supporting wage. As a result, growing numbers of people—many whom have not considered college in the past—are turning to higher education to improve their chances of success. More than two-thirds of Americans enroll in higher education or training after high school, but a much smaller



percentage actually end up earning a degree. Community colleges are being more widely viewed as a powerful lever for both improving individuals' earning prospects and increasing our nation's competitiveness.

There is broad consensus among states, national funders, and the social policy community that better outcomes for students who test into developmental education can dramatically improve community college completion rates. This is evident in states' financial support for developmental education innovation such as Texas's multi-million-dollar appropriation in the last legislative session and the Gates Foundation's investment of over \$100 million to improve outcomes in developmental education so that more young people graduate with a postsecondary credential that has labor market value. Improved outcomes in developmental education are also directly relevant to the Obama Administration's goal of graduating 5 million more Americans by 2020.

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENT RATES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

While demand for credentials and degrees is high, many students' plans to earn credentials and degrees are upended early in their academic careers because they lack the academic preparation they need to be successful in college-level work. According to an analysis of the National Longitudinal Education Survey (NELS:88), nearly 60 percent of community college students enrolled in at least one developmental education course. While these numbers are daunting, they actually underestimate the incidence of developmental education by not including older students. National experts estimate that as many as two-thirds of all community college students have academic deficiencies in one or more core academic subject areas that appreciably decrease their chances of completion.

THE COST OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Developmental education is expensive in terms of actual cost and opportunity cost. The most recent estimates put the annual cost of developmental education between \$1.2 and \$2.3 billion for community colleges and \$500 million for public four-year colleges. Students also pay a substantial cost because of the time spent foregoing earnings and the increased time it takes to earn the credentials that would give them a leg up in the labor market. Further, students with substantial developmental education requirements can deplete their financial aid while taking courses that do not count toward the credentials and degrees for which they have enrolled.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE NEED FOR DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

The most frequently cited factor driving developmental education enrollment is the weak academic preparation that many high school students have upon entry into higher education. Texas has been a national leader in establishing college-ready standards to help K-12 systems drive improvements toward higher achievement for all students. But there are other factors that contribute to the need for developmental education: older students returning to college after being in the workforce and raising families; workers attempting to upgrade their skills; and people who had not considered college in the past but are compelled to acquire new skills to increase their labor market value. The challenge of upgrading the skills of working adults will grow in the coming years. For the foreseeable future, regardless of how quickly we improve K-12 performance, developmental education will be critical to addressing the gap between high school and college expectations, and to accelerate the academic catch-up for returning adults.



PROMISING STRATEGIES

Despite the weak evidence base and the complexity of developmental education, there are some promising developments and emerging evidence of strategies and approaches that make a difference.

Preventive Strategies

Across the nation, an increasing number of community college systems are playing an active role in reaching out to K-12 to close the gaps in standards and expectations between high school and postsecondary education. This work is informed by state-level college readiness initiatives and national efforts such as the work many states are doing through Achieve, Inc. to develop college readiness standards. Texas has been a national leader in this area—establishing college readiness standards through “vertical teams” called for in House Bill 1 in 2006.

There are also a growing number of states that are reaching into high schools to test if students are on track to be college ready upon graduation. Furthermore, states are increasingly considering options for students to remediate academic deficiencies prior to enrolling in college. For instance, Florida recently passed legislation that allows high school students to be taught the top-level developmental education course curriculum while in high school.

Finally, we are seeing more states identify dual enrollment as a strategy to reduce the need for developmental education. Texas is a national leader in developing policy supports for dual enrollment and early college. The state’s investment through House Bill 1 in 2006 of a \$275 per student allotment for high school students has helped facilitate high school-college collaborations, such as college-credit options for high school students and the establishment of 41 early college high schools across the state. El Paso Community College has successfully used dual enrollment and early college as a strategy to decrease the number of students entering college underprepared. Studies by the Community College Research Center at

Teachers College, Columbia University have found that dual enrollment students were more likely to enroll in college, have high grade point averages, and persist from year to year in comparison to non-dual enrollment students.

Assessment and Placement Policy

There is general consensus in the field that the intake process for community college is critical to student success. Thus, states are increasingly reviewing and revising their assessment and placement policies, increasing their coherence and consistency to ensure that students who have academic support needs do not fall through the cracks and miss out on the help they need to be successful. Several states, including North Carolina and Connecticut, have established statewide common assessment policies and common placement cut scores.

There is also increasing activity in states to improve the diagnostic capability of assessment instruments so that institutions can design interventions that are customized to address the specific academic weaknesses identified by students’ assessment scores. Florida is in the process of revamping its assessment policy and is developing a new assessment instrument that will feature robust diagnostic capability. Similarly, Virginia is developing a new assessment that will pinpoint students’ academic weaknesses and allow colleges to place them into modules that address their deficiencies instead of semester-long courses. Furthermore, Florida, Virginia, and other states are augmenting their state-level data capacity in order to provide more information on students’ high school performance so that colleges can make better assessment decisions.

To realize the promise of improvements in assessment instruments, however, institutions need additional capacity and resources so that they have the time to consider all of the factors that influence students’ chances of success and make informed choices about the interventions to which students are referred.



Developmental Education Redesign

Strong evidence suggests that traditional delivery of developmental education does not work well for students who test just beneath the cut score and for students who test multiple levels below college proficiency. For the first group, the data reveal that students who have narrowly missed the cut score are as likely to be successful as students who tested just above the standard. Rather than being placed into developmental education, these students are better off entering directly into college-level courses with academic supports. For students who are multiple levels below college proficiency, very few ever complete their developmental education requirements, let alone enroll in a college or earn credentials or degrees.

In the *Achieving the Dream* sample, only 16 percent of students who were referred three levels below college-level proficiency finished their developmental education requirements. Promising strategies for this group include those that decrease the time that students spend in developmental education. For example, the Fast Start model at the Community College of Denver combines multiple levels of developmental education to increase completion rates. Other promising strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness include learning communities, which provide a cohort approach to learning; student success courses, which provide orientation and information on how to navigate college; and contextualized strategies that blend developmental education and occupational training, such as the Integrated Basic Skills and Education Training (I-BEST) program in Washington State.

Texas has been a national leader in support for developmental education innovation. The legislative riders of the 81st Texas Legislature—Rider #50 Developmental Education; Rider #56 Adult Basic Education Community College Grants; Rider #45 Align Adult Basic Education and Postsecondary Education; and others—are national exemplars that the other states participating in *Achieving the Dream* and the *Developmental Education Initiative* are learning from.

Data and Performance Measurement

One of the most promising developments in the effort to improve services to academically underprepared students is the work that states have done to better track and analyze longitudinal data on student progression and outcomes. If you cannot effectively measure the outcomes for students who test into developmental education, it is difficult to know what is working and what needs to be fixed. Texas and the other *Developmental Education Initiative* states are on the leading edge of this work. These states have collaborated to identify key performance indicators for developmental education that track both shorter-term and final measures. These states will use results on these indicators to identify, document, and disseminate the practices and policies that are most effective toward improving outcomes in developmental education. This work is critically important because it can identify high-performing institutions, so that their successful practices can be studied and shared with other colleges. Identifying institutions that are successful in serving students who test into developmental education is a key step toward improving their outcomes.

Finance

There is emerging evidence that structuring financial aid for persistence rather than just access can make a difference for low-income students. Many students in developmental education are low-income and are juggling work, family, and school. Promising strategies in this area include incenting full-time attendance and performance-based scholarships. In the first area, Connecticut has been a leader, packaging financial aid to encourage students who are able to attend full-time to do so. In the second area, the performance-based Opening Doors scholarship demonstration evaluated by MDRC has shown positive results for credit accumulation and persistence. MDRC has launched a new study to further evaluate the effectiveness of performance-based scholarships to improve persistence for low-income students.



The fragile financial condition of low-income students who are struggling in developmental education warrants special attention. Completing their developmental education requirements and advancing to college-level courses, credentials, and degrees dramatically improves the quality of students' lives and puts them within striking distance of earning family-supporting wages and contributing to our economic competitiveness.

The data suggest that most students make a valiant attempt—most developmental education enrollments end in successful completion—but that these students often fail to go the distance. Many students successfully pass one or even two courses, but then do not complete their requirements. Public Agenda's recent survey *With their Whole Lives Ahead of Them* cited the top two causes for students leaving college to be financial stress and the inability to juggle family, work, and school. Redesign efforts that minimize the time spent in developmental education and that help students go the distance to earn credentials and degrees will be critical to any robust strategy to improve outcomes.

CHALLENGES TO THE MOMENTUM TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES IN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

The growing demands on community colleges today come at a time of severe fiscal constraints. During lean times, the core supports that developmental education students need to be successful (e.g., financial aid, advising and counseling, other academic and student services supports) are often the first to be cut. It is critical to maintain support for improving outcomes for students who test into developmental education—particularly support for innovation.

The states participating in *Achieving the Dream* and the *Developmental Education Initiative*—including Texas—are working to leverage state, private, and potentially federal funds to re-imagine and re-engineer developmental education in order to reduce the time students spend in remedial courses and accelerate their progress. When they succeed, the benefit accrues both to individuals' economic success and to states' growth and competitiveness.

It is an honor to have had this opportunity to speak before the committee today. Thank you.

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Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The *Developmental Education Initiative* is a three-year effort begun in 2009 to identify and develop programs that increase the number of community college students who complete preparatory classes and successfully move on to college-level studies. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education, it includes 15 colleges and six states that were early participants in the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* initiative. JFF manages the policy component of the initiative, working with policymakers in six states.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Lawrence Collins is program director for JFF's participation in two national initiatives: *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* and the *Developmental Education Initiative*. A policy research analyst and strategy consultant, his work focuses on assisting states to develop and implement public policies designed to increase the numbers of low-income students and students of color who successfully transition from high school into college, persist, and earn credentials and degrees. Mr. Collins regularly convenes education-thought leaders and collaborates with public policy decision makers, state and national intermediary organizations, philanthropic organizations, academic researchers, and nationally recognized policy experts to develop policies that support innovative blends of high school and college and to design and execute on-the-ground policy/action agendas for dramatically improving the rates at which students reach their individual education goals and states reach their education statewide education attainment and workforce goals.

Before joining JFF, Mr. Collins served as assistant to the Commissioner of Higher Education and Assistant Commissioner for Participation and Success at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. He is a graduate of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.