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*This chapter questions the dichotomous labeling and conceptualization of remedial and nonremedial students, particularly the added distinctions emphasized between four-year and two-year colleges, and it calls for a focus on the common challenges among all underprepared college students.*

## Beyond Remedial Dichotomies: Are 'Underprepared' College Students a Marginalized Majority?

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With a majority of beginning community college students enrolling in remedial/developmental coursework, serving these once marginal students is now a central function of most community colleges. Approximately 60 percent of community college students entering college demonstrate a need for at least one remedial/developmental course (Adelman, 1996; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey, 2006), and some community colleges that serve mainly low-income and minority students now enroll a student population of which upwards of three-quarters need remediation (McClenney, 2009). Despite moving *numerically* from margin to center, these students are still *academically* marginalized in key ways by institutional designations. They exist in an ambiguous status in that they must pay for their enrollment in college courses and are allocated the privilege of financial aid and tend to define themselves as college students, yet their institutionally designated remedial status restricts their access to other college-level coursework and to the accumulation of some postsecondary degree credits. Therefore, their trajectories toward a postsecondary credential may be obscured and delayed institutionally based on these ambiguous definitions (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002).

Rather than exploring the institutional dynamics relevant to the college pathways of underprepared students, such as those noted above, a good deal of research on the impact or effectiveness of remediation has instead focused on a comparison of the outcomes of remedial students with comparable samples of nonremedial students to argue the relative benefits or disadvantages of participation in remedial coursework (Attewell and others, 2006; Bailey, 2009; Bettinger and Long, 2009; Calcagno and Long,

2008). Such studies have used complex and precise statistical tools and quasi-experimental approaches to account for selection bias and differences in the placement of students into remedial coursework, essentially creating opportunities to compare similarly prepared students exposed to different remedial “treatments.” These important studies have shown mixed effects of remedial education. There are some modest positive results, but no strong evidence that access to remedial education in community college substantially facilitates or hinders credit or degree completion.

However, remedial students may have more in common with nonremedial students than one would presume from what has been highlighted in prior research. An overlooked finding of most prior studies of this topic (including those noted above) is that nearly all underprepared students—both those who are enrolled in remedial/developmental classes and those who are not—struggle to persist, and those in both categories who do persist are significantly delayed in their acquisition of a college credential. Fundamentally, such research has reinforced a well-known fact: being underprepared for college puts students at risk of noncompletion. This is apparently true regardless of whether or not students participate in remedial coursework, but the preceding studies fail to foreground this reality. In other words, the difference in college completion between students who demonstrate some measured lack of adequate preparation and those who do not is much greater than the difference between those enrolled and not enrolled in remediation.

Practices and policies should perhaps be aimed at dismantling old remedial-focused dichotomies in favor of a broader approach that encompasses the common challenges faced by all underprepared students, regardless of their institutional label/designation as remedial or non-remedial. The work of two leading scholars supports such a refocus from narrowly construed dichotomous definitions toward a broader approach. Clifford Adelman (1999, 2006), in exploring the pathways of students pursuing four-year degrees, highlights the prominence of high school academic rigor over remedial placement in influencing bachelor’s degree completion. Thomas Bailey (2009) offers suggestions and insights based on data regarding community college students, and he emphasizes the fact that “two-thirds or more of community college students enter college with academic skills weak enough in at least one major subject area to threaten their ability to succeed in college-level courses” (p. 13).

## **Definitions of and Variation Within and Outside the Remedial Student Status**

Ambiguity surrounds institutional definitions of which students are designated with remedial status. Within community colleges, remedial/developmental status is most often defined as a result of students’ placement testing in any of three areas—reading, writing (or English), and math.

Students who score below a particular level of college competence are recommended for placement into below-college-level classes. However, as several researchers have documented, substantial variation exists both within and across states, districts, and institutions in terms of how students get placed and which students get placed into remedial-level coursework. In some states, such as Ohio, placement into remedial coursework differs between institutions (Bettinger and Long, 2005), while in Florida, a common placement test score determines placement statewide (Calcagno and Long, 2008).

For states without the systematic policies that Florida has enacted, variation between districts and institutions can be extensive. Some districts make enrollment in the remedial class mandatory, while others allow the student to choose whether or not they will enroll at the level into which they tested. Some individual community colleges make remedial courses mandatory based on placement test scores, while other community colleges within the same district relegate the task of actual enrollment into these classes to counselors and advisors who recommend and encourage such remedial class enrollment (Levin and Calcagno, 2008). Furthermore, in six states, Perin (2006) finds community colleges often mandate student assessment for remedial course placement and then require that low-scoring students enroll in remedial courses even when the states do not mandate it. She also finds that faculty and instructors even routinely override mandatory assessment and placement policies so that students can bypass remedial classes, and some students avoid testing altogether. The types of instruments used for assessment varied tremendously, with additional subjective measures, including the institution's own tests, course grades, and student self-reports, influencing placement decisions. In addition, practices used to determine student readiness to advance in or exit from remediation vary widely (Perin, 2006). I found similar practices in my own research in Illinois, where placement practices differed even within a multicampus district. Students with the same placement test results routinely placed into remedial classes at one campus location and higher-level classes at another campus location. Overall, within the remedial/developmental category, there is quite a bit of variation in the levels of preparation and course-taking patterns that exist across states, districts, and institutions.

In light of this variation, it is not surprising that there are striking similarities between students designated as remedial/developmental and those not designated as such *within* community colleges as well as among remedial students *across* the two-year and four-year college divide. As noted above, a slippery slope characterizes the placement and classification systems that determine who enrolls in remedial courses and who does not. In fact, Calcagno and Long (2008), using a regression discontinuity approach, claim that enough similarity exists between students above and below the "cutoff" placement score that such a distinction can be considered arbitrary, and few

differences exist in the short- and long-term trajectories of these students. Other work reveals that remedial students enrolled in nonselective universities in Ohio face challenges perhaps as extreme as remedial students who populate the state's community colleges (Bettinger and Long, 2004). Despite these similarities between remedial and nonremedial students and between underprepared students across institution types, scholars and institutions use language, policy, and practice to marginalize remedial students and community college students relative to other students who are essentially at a very similar level of achievement. This puts community college remedial students at risk of being doubly marginalized.

### **Ambiguity at the Margins**

Ironically, such language and practices also create ambiguity of definition, which conceals these formal status distinctions from external scrutiny. Most remedial math and reading or writing courses are college credit bearing and qualify for financial aid—making them distinct from “noncredit” classes—even though many of these remedial classes cannot be applied for the purposes of transfer and some degree options. In this way, community colleges appear to be offering more “college”-level classes than they actually are offering, and student financial aid dollars are applied to this set of conditions. Related issues are reflected in the work of Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002), who found remedial coursework in a sample of two-year colleges in the Midwest to be labeled in a way that obscured the classes' remedial status, thus confusing students who did not realize these classes would extend their timetable to degree completion and would not count toward their degree requirements. Remedial classes were not clearly designated as distinct from similarly labeled classes in the same subject.

Such research in a Midwestern city was conducted a decade ago, yet a decade later in a district in another state in the Southwest, the same ambiguous labeling and lack of clarity continues. For example, the language used to describe math offerings at Pima Community College in Arizona includes no indication of remedial, developmental, or below college level ([https://bannerweb.pima.edu/pls/pima/az\\_tw\\_zipsched.p\\_search](https://bannerweb.pima.edu/pls/pima/az_tw_zipsched.p_search)). In fact, three levels of math can be applied toward an associate's degree but not toward transfer, and this is not clearly indicated either. Whereas the English Composition/Writing requirements are less ambiguous, with Writing 101 serving as the first level of such class credit for both associate's degrees and transfer credit. However, only some of the classes below the 101 level are labeled as “developmental” while others, including WRT 100, are not, yet they clearly are remedial in that they do not count as credit toward any degree or transfer pathways.

Adding to the complexity is the possibly growing trend of universities to “outsource” to community colleges the instruction of their below-college-level classes. When the idea of four-year colleges passing the responsibility

for remediation on to community colleges is discussed, we typically think of how institutions like the City University of New York (CUNY) might refuse to admit students who score below a placement threshold that identifies them as needing remedial coursework. However, under revenue pressures, a growing number of broader access universities may still be enrolling “remedial” students despite state-level and other policies. For instance, Arizona universities have been engaging in arrangements with local community colleges to allow admitted university students to take one or more below-college-level classes at the community college while paying tuition and receiving financial aid as university students.

Despite these developments, absent from the research literature is an acknowledgment that students who gain admission to nonselective or moderately selective universities are also marginal. Students at the University of Arizona, for instance, can be admitted with up to three “deficiencies.” Therefore, although state policies in many states, including Arizona, “prohibit public four-year universities from offering remedial education” (Bettinger and Long, 2005, p. 17), throughout the past decade, Arizona universities do not prevent their “deficient” admits from taking one or two community college remedial classes until they are ready to place into college-level classes. This practice may be more widespread than researchers realize. In fact, at the University of Arizona, typically, placement test results place more than a third of the incoming freshman class below the lowest level of math offered at the university and therefore enrolls students in any one of four levels of lower-level math at Pima Community College (PCC). Interestingly, the proportion of freshmen at the university enrolled in the community college’s remedial classes in any given semester is not much lower than the proportion of PCC enrollments in such math classes overall—approximately 40 percent at the downtown campus.

The ambiguity in the definition of remedial status previously noted is further complicated by such intersections and fluid boundaries exemplified by these “remedial” class enrollments of four-year college students in community colleges. In the example of the University of Arizona, the lowest level of math at the university has traditionally been Math 112, but at PCC, in which students enroll if they place below Math 112, the classes include Math 122 and lower numbers. So the potential for confusion abounds since Pima’s Math 122 is actually a lower-level math than the university’s Math 112, and “college”-level math at Pima begins with Math 142.

Another example of university student marginality is the fact that many university students enroll in and then subsequently fail college-level classes. Again, this is more typical for math and science classes. These students then have to retake these classes again, and they either do so at the university or at their local community college while still enrolled as university students. Such examples blur the lines between who is a remedial student and who is not and foreground the delays and challenges of students

who are not officially designated as remedial students, but who face significant danger of nonpersistence due to failing nonremedial classes for which they are not prepared. Few studies have examined the ramifications of dropped and failed classes among community college and four-year college students who are not of remedial status. These students constitute a potentially marginalized and certainly at-risk population who are overlooked due to our focus on categorizing and contrasting along the remedial/nonremedial and the two-year/four-year divides. Such students do not initially place into remediation, but they are clearly at risk of noncompletion. Recent research on patterns of enrollment at multiple institutions and increases in reverse transfer, particularly among low-socioeconomic-status students, lend more evidence to this growing segment of the undergraduate population (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer, 2009).

### **Experiences of Students at the Margins of the University**

In my current research, hundreds of students who participate in summer bridge programs and income-based scholarship programs at the University of Arizona were interviewed as part of two separate studies. Many of these university students experienced some form of enrollment in classes at Pima Community College. These students fell into three groups. One group took Pima classes in their first semester based on their placement test scores. This was the group most likely to be enrolled in a remedial-level class. Another group took Pima classes in their second semester after dropping or receiving a D or lower in a math or English class during their first semester at the university. A third group took classes in the summer following their first year or in their sophomore year, after they received a grade point average low enough to put them on academic probation at the university. The vast majority of the students interviewed for this study were underrepresented racial minority students. Interestingly, these students were quite different from underrepresented students I had interviewed in my research in Chicago (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person, 2006). In that prior research, students showed little evidence of feeling stigmatized by their remedial or underprepared status, or their movement as reverse transfers from four-year to two-year colleges (Deil-Amen and Goldrick-Rab, 2009). In contrast, in my current research, the university students seem to be greatly affected by a fear of being stigmatized, and they experience stereotype threat as well, often fearing that they will be the example of the low-achieving minority student that their peers and instructors expect.

While those students—especially those racial minority students—who gain access to universities are often viewed as the success stories relative to those who enroll in community colleges, my research reveals that these students are similarly vulnerable to failure, particularly if they find themselves underprepared to succeed at the university. Below, the perspectives

and challenges of specific students who found themselves enrolled in community college classes at some point are highlighted as examples of the larger trends. Some of the huge lecture classes at the university present these students with additional challenges that community college students rarely face. As Selena explained, “Well, about the classes, it is like it is so big. I mean some classes are over 100 students and that stresses me out. I cannot concentrate. I did not expect that. I expected regular classes like 30 people. I mean those are the classes I have been having a little more trouble with.”

Over three quarters of the students interviewed experienced a serious academic challenge upon enrollment, and nearly a quarter of students resisted seeking help because they feared that they were too incompetent to belong in college or that others would perceive them to be incompetent as college students. Ayanna is a good example of a student who struggled in her large lecture class but did not go to the professor for “extra help” because she attached a “bad stigma” to getting extra assistance. She felt, “I should be able to do this on my own.” Chandra admitted, “. . . at first I thought that if everyone around me is getting this, why aren’t I getting it, too, and I kind of thought there was something wrong with my head. . . . at first I’m just thinking I don’t know if this is for me. I don’t understand any of this, and it made me feel bad for a while because I’m like is it just me or is it because of the way I grew up?” Mark’s comments reveal how gender also played into students’ negative views on needing additional help to succeed in college. He did not seek much assistance in his first semester, was on academic probation in his second semester, and said, “I really probably should look for, like, more help, but I haven’t really. I’ve been an independent person for a while and I’m trying to keep that going. . . . My motto is to be a man you need to learn how to survive all by yourself.”

Students’ fears of being exposed as inadequate were compounded by their lack of feelings of entitlement. They expressed feeling that they would be imposing on college professors and staff by requesting guidance and help. Carlos expressed this sentiment:

Yeah sometimes I had real difficulties trying to get a subject in the class, and people were there to help me. I could have easily just gone to office hours or something and I just decided to stick to myself and try to do it myself, and it didn’t end up so well because I didn’t really get the grasp of the subject. And then I would have to go into class and have a test or a quiz so it didn’t really work out that well. . . . I think I did that because I felt going and asking for much help was taking their time and bothering them so much I guess. And now I know that’s what they are there for and I have to take advantage of them because they are there to help.

This qualitative research reveals portions of the social-psychological perspectives that inform the decisions and behaviors of university students

who find themselves facing steep academic challenges and enrolled in “remedial” community classes despite their admission to a selective university.

### **What Works and Doesn’t Work: Recent Remedial Interventions and Their Impact**

Prior evaluations of remedial student learning outcomes have looked within institutions and within specific classrooms to determine what pedagogical approaches appear to work best to improve the learning of remedial students (Boylan, 2002; Levin and Koski, 1998). Much of this research, however, is descriptive or documents correlational relationships, and it is not designed to identify potential causal relationships between the interventions and remedial student outcomes. More recently, longitudinal evaluations of interventions at multiple institutions using random assignment provide more rigorous tests of what approaches yield desired results. Perin and Hare (2010) conducted research using randomized controls to test the effectiveness of particular interventions on the skill acquisition of remedial/developmental reading students at three community colleges. Preliminary results show reading and writing skills improvement for the students participating in this Content Comprehensive Strategy Intervention (CCSI), which combines practice in critical reading and writing skills with additional academic support and a focus on engaging students in reading passages specific to students’ interests—anatomy and physiology for some groups and more generic high-interest themes for others. The control group did not receive the interventions. Another project involves six community colleges participating in the National Center for Postsecondary Research’s Learning Communities Demonstration. Researchers are attempting to determine if learning communities are an effective strategy for helping students who need developmental education. Thus far, findings from one of the community colleges in Florida reveal no meaningful impact on students’ academic success for the full study sample. However, evidence shows positive impacts on some educational outcomes for the third cohort of students, suggesting a honing and maturing of the program may have resulted in improvements relevant to the desired outcomes. In particular, faculty collaboration and curricular integration may have finally led to some increases in student academic success (Weiss, Visher, and Wathington, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The content of this chapter has attempted to broaden the discussion of remediation in key ways by moving beyond a discussion of community college remedial students to address the larger population of two-year and four-year students who begin college at the margins of “college-level” readiness. In creating an artificial dividing line between remedial and



nonremedial students, the broad scope of the issue of underpreparedness becomes truncated, and debates become narrowly focused on differences between remedial and nonremedial course taking, and the context of these debates narrowly focuses on community colleges rather than including broad access universities that are also enrolling huge populations of underprepared students (Venezia and Kirst, 2005).

Similarities, differences, and overlap exist between two and four-year underprepared students and should be acknowledged and incorporated into research and programmatic agendas. In particular, it should be recognized that the key issue of concern is that a majority of underprepared community college enrollees—both those who are enrolled in remedial coursework and those who are not—fail to persist at very high rates. The research on the impact of specific interventions with remedial/developmental students is a step in the right direction to determine what works with this population. However, the work of practitioners like Professor Peter Adams at the Community College of Baltimore County should be examined carefully as well. He has advocated for and created an approach to developmental writing that mainstreams these students with college-level students and accelerates their learning through the provision of extra support through an additional shadow class offering extra advising and skill-building. His own internal tracking of outcomes demonstrates major increases in retention and progress to the next level (Adams, 2010). This applied research he has been engaging in at his own institution provides some food for thought. His interventions break the traditional dichotomy of remedial/nonremedial by teaching remedial students in the same classroom alongside students who placed into college-level English. Perhaps the success of such local strategies can inform more broadly applied and evaluated interventions.

Given the massiveness of the underprepared majority and the extensive variation within it, the larger picture begs the following questions for future research:

1. How can we move beyond a discussion of community college remedial students to better define the larger population of two-year and four-year students who begin college at the margins of “college-level” readiness?
2. How can we begin to understand the similarities, differences, and overlap between two and four-year underprepared students?
3. How and why do the majority of underprepared community college enrollees (both those who are enrolled in remedial coursework and those who are not) fail to persist at such high rates?
4. For those who do persist and are not enrolled in remedial coursework, why are so many proceeding just as slowly toward degree completion as those enrolled in remedial coursework? Essentially, what practices and behaviors are delaying those underprepared students who are not enrolling in remedial courses?

In terms of policy and practice, efforts need to both account for variations within the developmental population and extend across false dichotomies that categorize and thereby marginalize students by remedial/developmental status or institution of enrollment.

**Recommendations for Action.** Research and practice at both community colleges and broad access universities may benefit from a shift away from the tendency to create dichotomies between remedial and nonremedial students and between community college and four-year college student populations. First, with so much research focused on disentangling the impact of remedial participation on various persistence and completion outcomes, too little attention has been paid to figuring out what works to improve learning *and* persistence for any student who is underprepared. Until very recently, a focus on learning has been completely divorced from a focus on longer-term persistence and degree acquisition outcomes. Evaluations of remedial/developmental approaches continue to yield little evidence of the effectiveness of remedial approaches relative to other approaches or the effectiveness of particular remedial/developmental interventions. Future research should work in collaboration with community colleges and instructors to simultaneously assess the effect of interventions on both learning and longer-term persistence and completion outcomes for underprepared students.

Such research should not be limited to what happens within particular classrooms. As Perin (2005) describes, community colleges differ widely in their organizational and instructional approaches to developmental education, and these variations need to be considered when decisions are made about trying to improve learning and other outcomes for remedial and other underprepared students, particularly in the context of changing demographics. It is important to always consider that the delivery of educational services occurs within a larger institutional context and an even broader sociocultural and economic context that heavily influences student trajectories. How students interpret their learning and college participation within the larger context of their lives and identities and make decisions based on these complex dynamics is a key component too often neglected in educational research. The work described above and other recent research address the importance of students' decision-making processes and strategizing based on their social context (Cox, 2009; Deil-Amen and Tevis, 2010). By excluding these processes from research agendas, educational researchers are signaling their lack of attention to the sociological and psychological elements of all human interaction. Better understanding the larger social context and immediate social-psychological processes at work can help evaluators and researchers better interpret the short-term and long-term results of particular pedagogical approaches—for both remedial and other underprepared students who are not in remedial classes but facing similar challenges.

As an important component of such research, we should include how remedial programming and instruction is actually organized and

implemented within institutions and among institutional leaders. Perin's prior work on this topic highlights the centrality of these organizational dynamics (Perin, 2002a, 2002b). Also, the study of learning community interventions noted above shows the dynamics of organizational implementation are pivotal, including the need for consensus about the standards for college-level work, faculty collaboration, curricular integration, administrator support, and an alignment between assessment for placement and diagnosis for instruction (Safran and Visser, 2010). A research agenda that includes the four elements of (1) student learning, (2) persistence and completion outcomes, (3) student strategizing and decision making, and (4) organizational implementation represents a more comprehensive approach that has not yet been brought to fruition.

Second, community colleges and scholars interested in research on these institutions should focus some attention on students who show evidence of being underprepared yet are not labeled as remedial status. These students may be caught in a cycle of dropping and/or failing classes early on in their college trajectory—a pattern that jeopardizes not only their learning, but also their cumulative grade point average and their chances of successful persistence and degree completion. At four-year colleges, underprepared students are also at risk in the same way and should receive enhanced advising, mentoring, and academic support. Longitudinal studies can track the course-taking patterns of these students to identify how and where students begin on a path toward withdrawal or failure. Students who are not officially classified as “remedial” but who are taking remedial classes at community colleges initially or after failing to pass college-level courses may be particularly at risk. Universities and community colleges should work in partnership around remedial/developmental education, particularly since “below college level” at the university is defined differently than at the community college. This situation, in which local community colleges may be teaching the students considered “remedial” by universities, deserves further attention. Overall, it is important for institutions and policy makers to question the practices and behaviors that are delaying so many students who are *not* enrolled in remedial coursework, causing them to proceed just as slowly toward degree completion as those enrolled in remedial coursework.

Finally, community colleges should work to create more transparency in the language used to convey which classes can and cannot be used toward associate degree requirements and which classes can and cannot be transferred for credit to a four-year college and for which majors. For researchers, it is less important to classify students as remedial or nonremedial, and more important to identify the college preparation opportunities and postenrollment interventions that best promote learning and persistence. It is less important to decipher if two-year beginners fare worse than four-year beginners in terms of BA completion than it is to identify subgroups of similarly underprepared two- and four-year beginners to

determine how institutions can best respond to their unique experiences and challenges. Taken together, underprepared students—if defined across two-year and four-year institutions and across the remedial/nonremedial divide—likely constitute a majority of undergraduates. No longer can we continue to consider them as a problematic “other” in need of special programming. They now represent the norm in our higher education system.

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