Students


Obama Administration Joins Efforts to Fix Remedial Education

By ASHLEY C. KILLOUGH

The Obama administration has thrown its weight behind a growing movement to fix remedial education — one of the main barriers between millions of students and college degrees.

The U.S. Department of Education indicated this new focus in its guidelines for how states can use education-related funds provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. While the department does not specify ways to allocate the money, it instructs states to raise standards consistent with the 2007 America Competes Act, which set a goal to reduce, and even eliminate, the need for remediation.

Remedial education "is such a drain on state dollars," says Julie Davis Bell, education-program director for the National Conference of State Legislatures. "The number is so awful in terms of students going into remedial ed who don't graduate."

According to a study by the Education Department, 61 percent of students who attended two-year public colleges from 1992 to 2000, and a quarter of those enrolled in four-year institutions, needed remediation. And studies show that students taking developmental classes are far less likely to complete their degrees, with only 30 percent to 57 percent doing so, depending on how many remedial courses they must take.

Most of the stimulus money will go toward plugging holes in state budgets, but Ms. Bell says reforming remedial education is a top priority for many states.

The need for remediation among recent high-school graduates has been a national dilemma for years. The debate centers on which institutions should be responsible for bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary curricula: the high schools that graduate students, or the colleges that accept them?

In many states, both seem to be stepping up to the plate. Experts highlight growing cooperation between community colleges and their surrounding school districts to make students more prepared for college. Also taking part are nonprofit projects like Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, and Achieve Inc.'s American Diploma Project. The College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives also began looking into the issue about a year ago.

"The government's on the right track thinking about alignment," says Stephen J. Handel, national director of the College Board's community-college office. "It's the right thing to do."
Working Together

El Paso Community College and the University of Texas at El Paso work closely with their area's 12 school districts to reduce the number of students enrolling in remedial courses. Using the College Board's Accuplacer test, the colleges evaluate high-school students for college readiness in their junior and senior years. Those with low scores can take short intervention tutorials, offered jointly by the high schools and colleges, in reading, writing, and mathematics.

The tutorials have produced results: The percentage of new graduates ready for college-level English and reading has increased significantly, and far fewer of them are placing into the lowest levels of remedial math.

"Sometimes students need only a few hours of refresher lessons to test into college-level work — not an entire semester," says Richard M. Rhodes, president of the community college.

This year the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board called for the Legislature to provide $30-million to offer those short classes statewide. Because of tight economic conditions, the state built in only $5-million to get the project started. "We're glad that it got the state's attention," Mr. Rhodes says. "But our stance is that we're beyond piloting. We're ready for implementation."

Raymund A. Paredes, the state's commissioner of higher education, says the project would not have received any money had the federal stimulus dollars not freed state funds.

As Texas works to overhaul remedial education, Mr. Paredes says, the early data on community-college and high-school partnerships have proved promising. "We'll probably encourage other community colleges to do the same, but it's not the only solution," he says. "It's not the magic bullet."

Other plans include providing better curricular training, and hiring more permanent faculty members, rather than adjuncts, to teach remedial courses. Texas also intends to experiment with developmental curricula by combining courses in reading, writing, and English — a method it hopes will be both innovative and cost-effective.

"There is nothing more important in higher education than developmental education. These students have high potential, but they aren't ready," Mr. Paredes says. "Every teacher at every level has a responsibility for these students."

In Florida, where 55 percent of students who entered public colleges in 2003-4 needed remedial courses in math, reading, or writing, the Legislature passed a law in 2008 requiring high schools to work with colleges to provide remedial instruction to seniors who test below the state's standards on the SAT, ACT, or the Florida College Entry-Level Placement Test.

In California, private foundations and the state's Department of Education have worked with the California Community Colleges and California State University to improve precollege education.

Some experts cite the America Diploma Project, started in 2005 by Achieve Inc., a nonprofit education-reform organization, as a leader in the momentum to advance college readiness. The project coordinates governors, state education officials, college leaders, and business executives from 35 states in aligning high-school curricula with college demands.

Remedial education could get another boost from the Obama administration through the proposed

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College Access and Completion Fund, which would allocate $500-million annually over five years for student retention.

The program would encourage grants for college readiness, says Daniel J. Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. "There is potential that states and institutions will use some of the resources to facilitate college completion for students who are underprepared academically," he says.

No Adult Left Behind

As policy makers work to increase college readiness, they must focus on improving remedial education, not just eliminating the need for it, says Bruce Vandal, director of the Postsecondary and Workforce Development Institute at the Education Commission of the States. "It is often seen as a redundancy, a failure in the system. And they hate investing money in a failure." Instead, he says, remedial education should be seen as an economic-development investment.

That's particularly true when it comes to adults returning to college after years — or decades — out of school, he says. Improving the high-school curriculum will not necessarily reduce the need for remedial education among those students.

Mr. Vandal suggests that states tap into the federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, which awards competitive grants totaling $4.35-billion from stimulus funds to promote educational and employment opportunities. At least $200-million will be designated for upgrades in technology at public computing centers, including community colleges.

That money could be used, in part, to pay for technology-based remedial courses. For example, Cleveland State Community College, in Tennessee, and the National Center for Academic Transformation have seen success with a project that replaces traditional lectures in basic math, elementary algebra, and intermediate algebra with self-paced work in computer labs.

The stimulus package has also directed $3.95-billion toward Workforce Investment Act programs, which the Department of Labor expects work-force-investment boards to use to help postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, provide retraining for adults seeking to improve their occupational skills. Mr. Vandal says some of that money could be used to improve remedial education for returning students.

Colleges will need to make such improvements, he says, for the country to reach President Obama's ambitious goal of making the United States the nation with the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020.

"We can't get there from here if we rely on the number of high-school students alone," Mr. Vandal says. "We have to work with adult re-entering higher education."

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