**Remedial-Education Reform May Fall Short Without More Focus on Nonacademic Support**

By Katherine Mangan March 01, 2017

The nation is unlikely to meet its ambitious college-completion goals unless remedial-education reformers spend more time examining the nonacademic factors that hold students back, according to a report being released on Wednesday by the [National Center for Developmental Education.](https://ncde.appstate.edu/)

Much of the focus of current reform efforts is on reducing the amount of time students spend in remedial classes before they can start earning college credit.

Not enough, the authors contend, is spent on financial insecurity, hunger, homelessness, and child-care worries that can derail the efforts of minority, low-income, and first-generation students.

Instead of blaming stand-alone courses for students’ failure to graduate, educators should examine more ways to integrate them with community support, they say in the [report,](https://ncde.appstate.edu/sites/ncde.appstate.edu/files/Completing%20College%20-Focus%20on%20The%20Finish%20Line.pdf) "College Completion: Focus on the Finish Line."

The report was written by three administrators of the national center, which is housed at Appalachian State University: Hunter R. Boylan, the director; Barbara J. Calderwood, assistant director for publications; and Barbara S. Bonham, a senior researcher. Mr. Boylan and Ms. Calderwood also teach about higher education at Appalachian State.

Reforming remedial, or developmental, education is a key strategy for groups that are trying to significantly improve graduation rates.

The Lumina Foundation, for instance, set a target of having 60 percent of Americans earn a quality degree or certificate by 2025. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation wants to double the number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree, and President Barack Obama challenged the nation to have the world’s largest percentage of degree holders by 2020.

The report examines a number of [promising approaches](http://www.chronicle.com/article/As-Reformers-Take-Aim-at/237841) that those and other groups have promoted, such as offering mathematics in modules and teaching remedial classes alongside credit-bearing ones.

Among the programs the group singles out for praise are the City University of New York’s [ASAP program,](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Programs-Extra-Support-for/190415) which offers extensive wraparound support for first-year students; the [I-Best Program,](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Stack-Those-Credentials/232985) which integrates basic-skills instruction with career training; and the [guided-pathway model,](http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Simpler-Path-Authors-Say/229133) which gives students fewer choices and a more-structured curriculum.

But despite some progress, reformers are likely to fall short of their goals for several reasons, the authors say. Those include the failure to distinguish between remedial classes and the broader scope of developmental education, which integrates coursework with nonacademic-support services that struggling students need.

The authors also say there is a mistaken assumption that because students who start out in remedial classes are far less likely to graduate, the classes themselves are to blame.

Remedial reading classes have been cut or integrated into writing classes on many campuses. In some cases, that step leaves students with shaky reading skills that follow them throughout college, the authors say.

Reform efforts, the report says, too often focus on finding "quick and simple solutions" to complex problems faced by underprepared students. "Adherents then claim," the report says, "that these solutions can be successfully applied with cookie-cutter regularity and minimal funding and supported by state and local policies."

**‘A Long-Distance Race’**

Groups that have spent millions of dollars on finding solutions to low graduation rates deny that they’re looking for quick fixes.

[**Diversity in cademe: First-Generation Students**](http://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Diversity-in-Academe-/3?cid=RCPACKAGE)

This special report focuses on the challenges facing first-generation students, whose numbers are growing as demographics shift.

"We do not believe, nor has anyone asserted, that remediation reform alone is the key to meeting our nation’s college completion goals," Tom Sugar, interim president of Complete College America, wrote in an email. "Our work involves [structural changes in other key areas,](http://www.core-principles.org/) such as credit accumulation, structured scheduling, guided pathways, and math-pathways redesign. It will take all of us working together — across these strategy areas — to meet the ambitious goals set for our country."

Travis Reindl, a spokesman for the Gates Foundation, said in an email: "We agree that providing more-integrated support to students is critical, which is why we also invest in things like improved advising and digital learning tools that help students pinpoint where they need help."

One thing most people agree on is that stand-alone remedial courses aren’t enough for most students. Too many students who could succeed in a college-level course are placed in them, partly because students don’t prepare for placement tests or realize how important they are.

In Florida, lawmakers seized on the low success rates of students who started out in remedial courses and made them optional for most students. [The law created problems](http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/student-passage-rates-drop-at-floridas-open-admissions-colleges/112682) for some instructors in gateway classes that unprepared students were opting to take, but it also prompted educators across the state to come up with quicker, more effective ways to help students catch up.

In Tennessee, [corequisite classes](http://www.chronicle.com/article/One-States-Big-Shift-Away/234019) were adopted statewide, giving students a chance to take remedial and college-level classes at the same time. The approach has helped many students move ahead more quickly, but left some of the weakest students lagging far behind.

More energy and resources need to be spent on faculty development to help adjunct professors improve their teaching and learning, the authors say.

And high schools and colleges should collaborate more closely to ensure that the exit standards of high schools are more [in line with the entry standards of colleges.](http://www.chronicle.com/article/High-School-Diploma-Options/233829)

Recent budget cuts mean that fewer faculty and staff members have to do more work. "It is unlikely that the kind of changes that need to take place to truly move the bar on college completion can take place in such a fiscal environment," the authors write. "If legislators and policy makers want change and improvement, they will have to pay for it."

Improving college completion rates is "a long-distance race" that will require everyone to focus on the finish line, the authors say, "not just the first hundred meters."

*Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter* [*@KatherineMangan,*](https://twitter.com/KatherineMangan) *or email her at* *katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.*