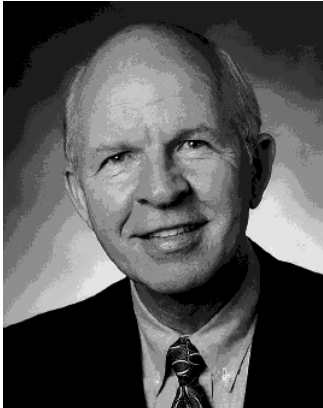


Making Remedial Education Work

Community colleges still have a long way to go to meet the needs of at-risk students. Here are six recommendations to improve your college's programs.

By John E. Roueche and Suanne D. Roueche



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Of the most serious challenges community colleges have faced, not one of the challenges has remained so controversial, has so divided community colleges ideologically, and has remained so resistant to change as has remedial education.

It is a tragedy that there has been so little progress toward establishing better systems of remedial education. It is mind-boggling that educational institutions have not joined together to prevent the serious threat that a large population of at-risk students presents to America's economic and social well-being. Even the appearance of broad-based resolve or strategy continues to be just out of reach of the academy, and the responses of individual colleges to the problems of remedial education remain loosely defined as to purpose and largely unexamined as to outcome.

It is not surprising that a heightened interest in the possibilities of success and the consequences of failure with at-risk students is driving unprecedented investigation into the way colleges embrace remedial education; it is surprising that it has taken so long to occur. It is clear that if community colleges do not better address remedial education, this country will suffer enormous consequences.

This article compiles current thinking and events, but we do not attempt closure here. Rather, we attempt a beginning by sharing our observations in order to inform and encourage, and by drawing from them some recommendations for future action. This is the bird's-eye view, which we wrote in 1993:

Students are leaving high school no better prepared than they were in the mid-1960s. In fact, evidence indicates that despite higher grade-point averages, these students' skills and competencies are at the lowest levels in American history. Moreover, we are not talking only about literacy, or unprepared or underprepared students as viewed from their mastery or their attainment of cognitive skills; we are looking at a new generation of adult learners characterized by economic, social, personal, and academic insecurities. They are older adults, with family and other financial responsibilities that require part-time, or often full-time, jobs in addition to coursework requirements; they are first-generation learners with unclear notions of their college roles and their goals; they are members of minority and foreign-born groups; they have poor self-images and doubt their abilities to be successful; and they have limited world experiences that further narrow the perspectives they can bring to options in their lives.

Serving as a backdrop for these realities is the community colleges' "mission blur," which was created in part by the challenge of being all things to all people; of facing classroom climates that are negatively affected by inner-city decline and poverty and by single-parent adults with little time to improve their lives; of grappling with the public misconception that there are too few jobs rather than too few people trained to do them; and of gearing up for the public school dropouts who condemn future generations of children to poverty and undereducation and America to higher crime and lower productivity. Unfortunately, "these issues may only appear to be traveling parallel paths . . . [but] they will collide . . . on many fronts with such magnitude that viable repair cannot occur for decades." Since we wrote those words in 1993, our future has become our present.

Recommendations

Overarching recommendation: *Survey the landscape for proactive responses.* The remedial education landscape includes some extraordinarily successful structures; that is good news. Some community colleges have tackled the problems of academic unpreparedness for at least a decade and have documented their success thoroughly. They have made the tough decisions and committed themselves to seeing them through before outside forces compelled them to do so. They had a clear vision of the need to identify goals — a vision that at the time must have appeared lofty, but that put them on a path to good progress — and to evaluate their progress critically and judiciously. The community colleges are the first to acknowledge that the tasks of agreement and implementation were not easy, but that the rewards are worth the effort. The successes they have achieved with academically at-risk students may be as exciting for these colleges as discovering that they are in far better positions to respond to current questions and criticisms of community colleges' performance with all students.

By stepping up to the task of responding to the challenges that at-risk populations bring and achieving some success, these colleges have married goals that critics argue are mutually exclusive — the goals of access and excellence. Kay McClenney, vice president of the Education Commission of the States, argues in her 1998 paper "Community Colleges Perched at the Millennium: Perspectives on Innovation, Transformation, and Tomorrow" in *Leadership Abstracts*, that the

will to achieve any transformation, or change, is critical to success:

For more than a decade I have been watching the transformational process in one particular community college — at the Community College of Denver. I have watched while, with tight resources, CCD's people have doubled enrollment, while also dramatically increasing student diversity and student outcomes, defining methods of assessing and documenting student learning, and most incredibly, virtually eliminating the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students. It did take 10 years of work. But the first thing it took was deciding to do it.

Some might be surprised that efforts to succeed with at-risk students could so dramatically change the entire institution, that everyone stands to profit by efforts to meet the needs of those most in need of instruction and support. We contend that, considering what we know today about improving students' academic performance, this outcome should not be surprising at all.

There is so much more to learn about what and how success has been achieved with at-risk students. The programs described in this article provide some flavor of the excellent places at which to begin a search. From this "good news" observation, we make these recommendations to community colleges:

Recommendation 1: *Examine the essential characteristics and components of other institutions' successful remedial courses and programs, not necessarily in the interest of adopting their strategies, but perhaps of adapting them.* No plans are as appealing to implement or as successful as those that carry the "made here" stamp; however, there are no reasons good enough and no time to reinvent the wheel.

Recommendation 2: *Employ a more collaborative effort to learn from each other.* There is no reason to hang, separately or together. Over the past few years, researchers have identified colleges with successful remedial programs or program components. We believe that there are other successes that will remain unknown because college leaders and remediation professionals either do not disseminate information or do not disseminate it widely and effectively.

Recommendation 3: *Ask the questions about your own performance that are being asked about others', and take action.* For example, an institution might study the core performance indicators in South Carolina and Colorado; their history of study, development, implementation, and revision makes them excellent documents with which to begin developing criteria for measuring program effectiveness. Colleges should collect data about goal achievement; most colleges do not understand, or fail to make, the critical links between goal and expected outcomes in identifying the appropriate data to be collected. Every community college should consider how well its program measures up against the criteria other colleges use to measure and report their performance. No college should ignore questions that policymakers, media, and community members ask about its performance, whether national or local. Flash points know no physical boundaries, and news travels fast.

Recommendation 4: *Provide a holistic approach to programs for at-risk students.* If colleges are totally committed to being successful with at-risk students, they must be prepared to think holistically. At-risk students come to college with such diverse needs that stand-alone services or classes — no matter how successful in helping at-risk students — will not achieve a college's larger goal of retaining these students and helping them achieve their own goals of improved performance and academic success. A successful learning lab, a strong reading program, or an excellent mathematics program, if offered as a stand-alone instructional service or class, falls far short of the broader institutional commitment that colleges must make.

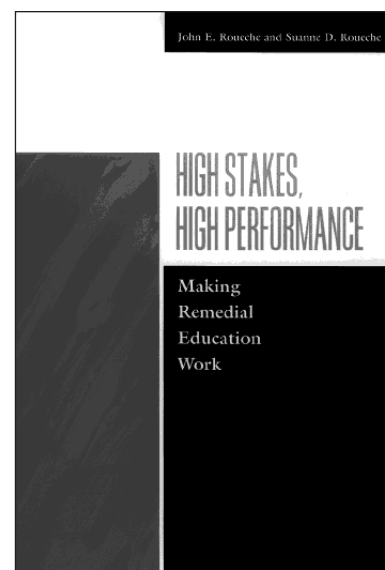
Recommendation 5: *Abolish voluntary placement in remedial courses.* Voluntary placement in remedial courses when assessment data indicate that basic skill instruction is critical to a student's successful future performance is a major shortcoming in what otherwise may be well-planned programs. Colleges that value assessment need to ask themselves why they make so much effort to assess students' academic skills — in fact, making assessment mandatory — and then leave the decision to enroll in remedial courses in the hands of the unprepared students.

Recommendation 6: *Create a more seamless web.* Critics who point to remedial education in college as evidence of a dysfunctional public education system are also quick to criticize higher education's refusal to challenge the educational system's poor performance. Placing blame requires too much time and energy, and it should be put aside in the interest of using time more wisely. A plan for improving student performance, developed and implemented by colleges in partnership with public schools, elementary through high school, has the greatest potential for achieving college readiness for first-time students.

Conclusions

Mark Twain observed that a good boat captain does not know just one spot in the water well; he knows the shape of the river. Our 20/20 hindsight tells us that most community colleges have wasted their “honeymoon” years with remedial education. They had the luxury of time to “learn the river” — that is, to resolve their differences and clarify their ideologies about remedial education as a major curriculum effort, to establish remedial education policies and programs, to experiment with their own strategies and adapt the most successful strategies of others, and to learn how best to evaluate their performance with at-risk students.

Institutions probably did not recognize that they were in this phase, because they were facing many other serious challenges. But current events should be creating a sense of urgency unlike any that community colleges have felt before. Unfortunately, colleges no longer have the luxury of planning a measured response. They are compelled to learn the river's shape by studying the experiences of captains who have ventured farther ahead on the river.



This article is an excerpt from *High Stakes, High Performance: Making Remedial Education Work*, by John E. Roueche and Suzanne D. Roueche. To order, contact the Community College Press, 800/250-6557; email: aaccpub@pmds.com; or see www.aacc.nche.edu/bookstore.

