

Remedial education

(also known as developmental education, basic skills education, compensatory education, preparatory education, and academic upgrading) is education designed to assist students in order to achieve expected competencies in core academic skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Whereas special education is designed specifically for students with special needs, remedial education can be designed for any students, with or without special needs; the defining trait is simply that they have reached a point of underpreparedness, regardless of why. For example, even people of high intelligence can be underprepared if their education was disrupted, for example, by internal displacement during civil disorder or a war.

Research on Outcomes

Depending on their skill level upon entering college, students can spend from 1 to multiple semesters working to fulfill remedial requirements before advancing to college level courses required for their degree. An example of a full sequence of math remedial courses for low-skill students might include: 1) Pre-Collegiate Math, 2) Basic Algebra, and 3) Intermediate Algebra.^[20] There are many questions about how this structure both benefits students by increasing their preparation and harms students by increasing the courses required and time needed to complete college. Thomas Bailey from the Community College Research Center describes this in a 2010 report: *For example, those with the greatest need for developmental math may be expected to enroll in and pass pre-collegiate math or arithmetic, basic algebra, and intermediate algebra, in order to prepare them for college-level algebra.*^[21]

Complete College America, a national non-profit working on remedial education reform, reports that among remedial students at two-year colleges 62% complete their remedial course and 23% complete associated college-level courses in that subject within 2 year (for example, complete math remediation and the college-level math requirements for their degree). On 4-year college campuses, 74% of students in remedial courses complete the course, and 37% complete remediation and an associated college-level course in that subject within 2 years.^[22] The same report projects that 9.5% of two-year college students starting in remediation will graduate within 3 years, and 35.1% of 4-year college students starting in remedial courses will graduate within 6 years.

Similarly, a nationwide study of two year college students participating in remedial education found 46% of students referred to remedial reading and 33% of students in math remediation completed their remedial sequence. A substantial portion of these non-completing students – 29% in math and 16% in reading – did so because they did not pass their remedial course.^[23] Another 11% of math students and 9% of reading students exited college without ever having failed or completed a remedial course. Students that enrolled in college and were placed into a sequence of 3 or more remedial courses were the least likely to persist to a college-level course. Like in all education

pathways, there are many different points at which remedial students can step out of education. Research from the [Community College Research Center](#) at Columbia University suggests that many students do not complete their remedial sequences or do not enroll in the first college-level course in that subject.

Beyond the Rhetoric

Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy

■ The Gap Between Enrolling in College and Being Ready for College

Every year in the United States, nearly 60% of first-year college students discover that, despite being fully eligible to attend college, they are not ready for postsecondary studies. After enrolling, these students learn that they must take remedial courses in English or mathematics, which do not earn college credits. This gap between college eligibility and college readiness has attracted much attention in the last decade, yet it persists unabated. While access to college remains a major challenge, states have been much more successful in getting students into college than in providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to complete certificates or degrees. Increasingly, it appears that states or postsecondary institutions may be enrolling students under false pretenses. Even those students who have done everything they were told to do to prepare for college find, often after they arrive, that their new institution has deemed them unprepared. Their high school diploma, college-preparatory curriculum, and high school exit examination scores did not ensure college readiness.

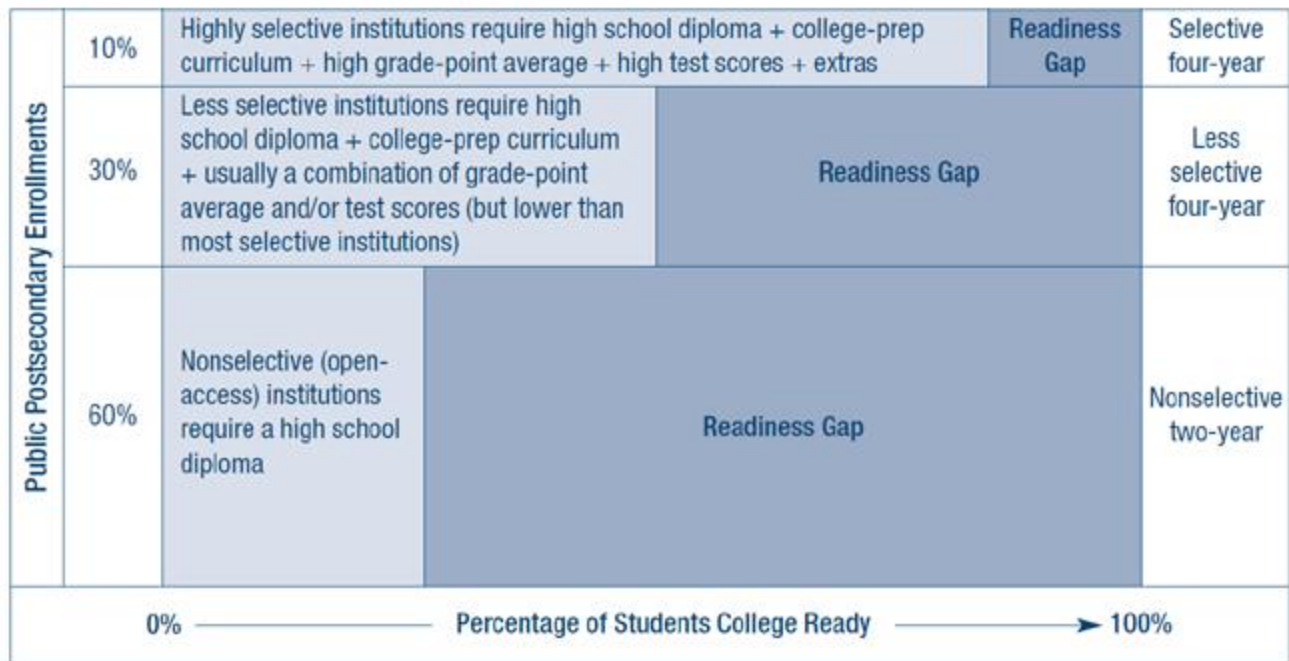
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education has issued three recent publications on college readiness. *The Governance Divide* explains how the divide between P–12 schools and postsecondary education has grown, as larger numbers of students and more diverse populations are seeking postsecondary education. *Claiming Common Ground* identifies policy tools that states can use to bridge the divide. *States, Schools, and Colleges* finds that P–16 councils are not ideal mechanisms for achieving alignment between schools and college systems, since they usually lack the authority, resources, and capacity to drive a state-level policy agenda.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is working with government and education leaders and with Achieve, Inc., in a number of states to promote policy changes to increase college readiness of students. SREB has developed a model college readiness agenda including six components, all of which must be addressed if state efforts are to be comprehensive, systemic, and effective. At the heart of this agenda is the adoption of specific, statewide college readiness standards that influence classroom instruction from middle school through high school in fundamental ways.

Lack of readiness for college is a major culprit in low graduation rates, as the majority of students who begin in remedial courses never complete their college degrees. As a result, improving college readiness must be an essential part of national and state efforts to increase college attainment.

Figure 1 shows the extent of the college readiness problem by portraying the gap between eligibility for college and readiness to do college-level work. Students in public colleges and universities attend one of three types of postsecondary institutions: highly selective four-year institutions, somewhat selective four-year institutions, and nonselective or open-access two-year colleges. The readiness gap is nominal in the most selective universities because their admissions criteria screen out most students who are underprepared. The gap is huge, however, in the other two sectors of higher education, which serve between 80% and 90% of undergraduates in public institutions.

Figure 1: The Readiness Gap by Institutional Sector



In two-year colleges, eligibility for enrollment typically requires only a high school diploma or equivalency. About one-quarter of incoming students to these institutions are fully prepared for college-level studies. The remaining 75% need remedial work in English, mathematics, or both. Eligibility for enrollment in less-selective four-year institutions (often the "state colleges") typically includes a high school diploma and additional college-preparatory coursework. Experience shows that these additional eligibility requirements still leave about half of incoming freshmen under-prepared for college. Firm data on the portions of entering college students who need remediation in English and/or math are not available, but the proportions shown in figure 1 reflect national estimates.¹ All told, as many as 60% of incoming freshmen require some remedial instruction.

These national estimates may be conservative, since not all students who are underprepared for college are tested and placed in remedial courses. The California State University (CSU), a large public university system, for many years has applied placement or readiness standards in reading, writing, and mathematics that are linked to first-year college coursework. All first-time students at all 23 CSU campuses must meet these standards, principally through performance on a common statewide placement examination. Despite systemwide admissions policy that requires a college-preparatory curriculum and a grade point average in high school of B or higher, 68% of the 50,000 entering freshmen at CSU campuses require remediation in English language arts, or math, or both. Should the same standards be applied by the California Community Colleges with their open admissions policies, their remediation rates would exceed 80%. There is every reason to believe that most states would have similar remediation rates if they employed similar college readiness standards and placement tests across all public colleges and universities.

This huge readiness gap is costly to students, families, institutions, and taxpayers, and is a tremendous obstacle to increasing the nation's college attainment levels