

Better alignment needed between high schools, community colleges

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University of Illinois education professor Debra Bragg says a major reason why college completion is not keeping pace with enrollment is that many students graduate from high school inadequately prepared for college-level work. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

High schools need to work with community colleges to align their curricula better and to reduce the number of students who need to enroll in remedial courses, according to a University of Illinois expert who studies community college education policy.

Debra Bragg, a professor of educational organization and leadership and the director of the Forum on the Future of Public Education at Illinois, says a major reason why college completion is not keeping pace with

enrollment is that many [students](#) graduate from [high school](#) inadequately prepared for college-level work.

"It's a system-wide problem, as well as a fundamental lack of alignment between high schools and colleges, and the system's lack of expectations and support for students who aren't seen as high achievers as they progress through K-12," Bragg said.

Of students attending community colleges, 58 percent were enrolled in at least one remedial course, compared to slightly more than 30 percent of students attending non-selective four-year institutions, 2 percent attending selective four-year institutions, and fewer than 1 percent at highly selective institutions. During the 2006 to 2007 school year, about 6.2 million students attended community colleges, accounting for nearly half of all undergraduate students enrolled in higher education in the U.S.

When students spend a semester or more re-taking high school or sometimes even elementary school-level course work at a community college before ever enrolling in a college-level class, it not only slows whatever educational momentum they have toward earning an associate's degree or eventually transferring to a four-year institution, it also greatly reduces the chances of that student ever completing any college certificate or degree, a key goal of President Obama's ambitious American Graduation Initiative, Bragg said.

"It's a pervasive problem in that, by repeating these high school-level courses, it uses up a lot of students' financial aid," she said. "When students don't have the money to go to school, their choices are limited to finding entry-level jobs in a tight labor market. Once they do that, the likelihood that they will ever go back to school and earn a degree is greatly diminished."

Despite college enrollment being at an all-time high, the percentage of students earning college degrees has remained relatively unchanged over the past 25 years. From 2004 to 2007, less than three in 10 community college students actually earned degrees, according to federal data. With other countries' college completion rates rising, the U.S. is holding steady in real numbers but declining relative to other countries in the proportion of students with college credentials.

In Illinois, Bragg noted positive developments associated with the state's College and Career Readiness Pilot Act, a law passed in 2007 aimed at reducing remediation in Illinois' community colleges. One of the positive developments to come out of the bill, Bragg said, is that high schools and community colleges in Illinois are now establishing partnerships, including incorporating earlycollege-level placement testing when students are still in high school, and having instructors share grading rubrics to better assess where students need to be when they graduate for high school and enter college.

"There was a systemic problem - seeing these the K-12 and higher education systems as separate - as well as a lack of understanding between high schools and colleges about the level of competency that students need to enroll in college credit-generating classes," Bragg said.

High-stakes tests such as the SAT, ACT and the myriad achievement tests used to judge adequate yearly progress by states is also part of the problem because are not aligned with college-level material, Bragg said.

"Those kind of tests tell us a little bit about what a student has learned in high school, but not enough," she said. "Nationally, we really need to get the conversation going between high schools and community colleges about what they teach, how they teach, and what and how they assess. We need to get teachers from both levels on the same page so there's not such a big gap for students."

One idea for reform that's gained some traction would allow 10th graders who pass a series of tests to bypass their junior and senior years and immediately enroll in community college. A poor performance on such a test could provide students with an early warning about the knowledge and skills they need to master in high school before they go off to college.

"That's an idea that's been around for quite some time, but I think it's one that doesn't align very well with our values," Bragg said. "The state of Oregon designed statewide school reform around a very similar idea in the late 1980s. There were never able to fully implement the reforms, and the clout it would take to reform the system on that level would be pretty enormous.

"We're already starting to see a blurring of college and career prep programs that are extending into the high schools that recognize all students need the academic skills to be successful in college or the workforce. But it's a little too top-down for our country."

In some higher education circles, there's an impression that remedial courses are cash cows for community colleges, with demand so great for some courses that they now operate on an around-the-clock schedule. But tuition rates for remedial-level classes are typically lower than they are for college-level courses, and community college tuition overall is quite low, Bragg says.

"Community colleges aren't getting rich off of these remedial students," she said.

"Even though they are usually using adjunct faculty to teach remedial students, they are expenses that exist outside the core budget to deliver remedial programs."

The bigger issue for community colleges, according to Bragg, is the largely undeserved rap that they're a second-class institution of higher education.

"What's really disconcerting is the growth in remedial courses while still needing to hold the line on academic standards," she said. "The dilemma is how you sustain yourself as an institution of higher education when the largest growing number of students are below college level. That's really troubling to community college leaders.

"But if we can align curriculum better and, for those who need it, find a very effective strategy at the high school level, then we could move a fair number of students out of the remediation track."

Despite the hefty price tag of last year's American Graduation Initiative - \$12 billion over 10 years - Bragg believes President Obama's faith in community colleges is more than justified.

"I don't think it's misplaced because where community colleges typically shine is in workforce development," she said. "They have been the higher education institution that has been willing to step up and partner with business and industry to design curriculum around demand. Those ideas are not ones that the rest of [higher education](#) has stepped up to very quickly. New programs of study emphasizing college and careers have led high schools to counsel students to take more rigorous coursework in the junior and senior years of high school, in the hopes of avoiding remediation."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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