New study evaluates remedial pathways for community college students

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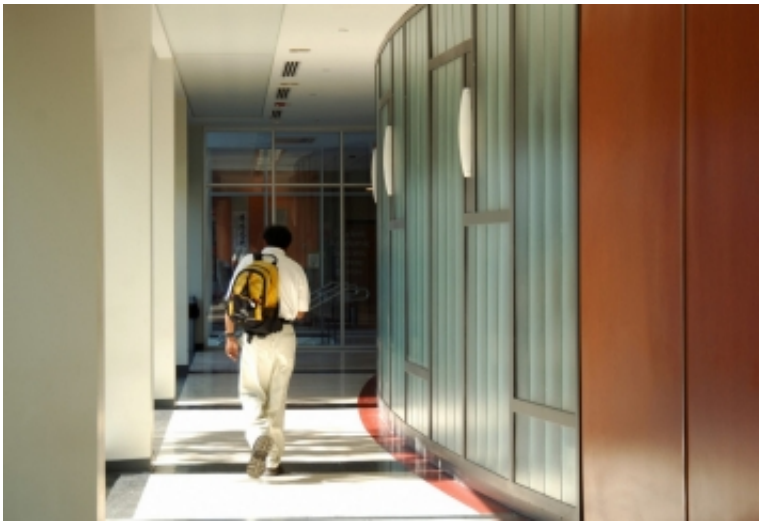

Academic programs that provide alternatives to traditional remedial education help students succeed at community colleges, but different programs result in a range of outcomes. Credit: © Ingram Publishing / thinkstock

Academic programs that provide alternatives to traditional remedial education help students succeed at community colleges, but different programs result in a range of outcomes for various sub-populations of students. Drew Allen, a New York University doctoral student and director of the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Program Support at the City University of New York (CUNY), devoted his doctoral research to the evaluation of three current programmatic approaches at CUNY community colleges.

Entering community college students are often required to take remedial, non-credit courses to meet college-readiness standards. Nationwide, previous studies have shown that approximately 58 percent of students who entered community colleges took at least one developmental or remedial course. However, remedial courses often increase the cost and time required to obtain a degree.

For many students entering community colleges, remedial or developmental education courses represent the first steps on the pathway toward a degree. Allen notes, "If educators are able to improve students' progress through developmental education or implement new alternatives to traditional remedial coursework, the overall outcomes for community college students could be dramatically improved."

Allen recently presented his findings at the Association for Institutional Research's 2015 Forum in Denver. Allen's research was funded by a dissertation grant from the Association for Institutional Research, which is supported by the National Science Foundation, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

Allen's study examined remedial pathways available to students at New York City community colleges within the CUNY system, where eight in 10 students who began as first-time freshmen in fall 2013 needed some type of remedial education. The large size and significant diversity of the CUNY student population provided a unique opportunity to compare the outcomes of remedial pathways across multiple underrepresented populations within higher education, including low-income students, students of different ages, non-native English speakers, and students of color.

"Despite the proliferation of developmental education models, colleges and universities across the country have often developed them through a

'one size fits all' approach, giving little thought to the differences within and across groups of students," Allen says.

Using longitudinal data from six CUNY community colleges, Allen tracked students enrolling in different alternative developmental educational pathways, comparing them to students who immediately enrolled in associate degree programs, and conducted in-depth interviews with community college administrators and faculty. The study focused on the following three pathways:

- Summer Immersion - Students can enroll in remedial coursework in the summer before starting a CUNY degree program (or winter intersession for students entering in the spring). Results suggested that students who enrolled in summer immersion prior to matriculation experienced significant and positive effects on several outcomes, including a 74 percent increase in the odds of earning 20 credits by the end of the first year. Interestingly, younger students benefited more from summer immersion than those who applied to CUNY at the age of 25 or older, who experienced a more modest benefit. Summer immersion was not as effective for students whose native language was not English.
- English Language Immersion - Students identified by CUNY as needing additional support in speaking and writing in English can delay enrollment and instead enroll in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). The program was also shown to have positive effects, including increasing the odds of passing the first college-level English course by 31 percent. Enrollment in this program delays matriculation thus invariably resulting in longer time to degree attainment. For students who ultimately enrolled in CUNY degree programs after participating in CLIP, likelihood of college completion was found to be significantly higher than comparable students who had no prior CLIP experience. Similar to summer immersion, outcomes of language

immersion were found to be relatively more effective for younger students.

- CUNY Start - Students with developmental needs in reading, writing, and/or math can enroll in this intensive 15- to 18-week program designed to build students' academic skills and minimize the amount of developmental coursework they must take when they matriculate. In this study, CUNY Start was associated with positive and significant outcomes in completing remedial requirements, passing college-level English and math gateway courses, and completing a degree. While the program slows credit accumulation in the first year, delaying enrollment in a degree program for a semester ultimately did not appear to hurt medium and longer-term outcomes.

While the three remedial pathways overall led to better academic outcomes, the differences between student populations reveal opportunities to maximize the benefits of these programs.

"For example," Allen notes, "summer immersion was found to be more effective for younger students. Based on this study, educators and policymakers could focus attention and resources on students in need of remediation who enter community college right out of high school." This finding supports prior research on the benefits of maintaining academic momentum for students during the summer between high school and college.

Allen adds that this research contributes to the conversation on simplifying and streamlining progress through community college, which can be unnecessarily difficult for students to navigate. His study also sets the stage for future research, including comparative cost-benefit studies of these remedial pathways and analyses to highlight how these pathways connect to other types of student support strategies like CUNY's ASAP (Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs).

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