

Remedial courses fail bachelor's degree seekers, but boost those in associate's programs

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Taking remedial courses at the four-year college level may hold students back from earning their bachelor's degrees, but at the community college level remedial education can help earn an associate's degree, according to researchers from Boston College's Lynch School of Education.

The role of remedial education has been under scrutiny for years, viewed as an essential tool in efforts to raise rates of degree completion. At the same time, critics question whether the courses are appropriate for institutions of higher education.

The answer may not be so simple, according to Lynch School researcher Katherine A. Shields and Associate Professor of Education Laura M. O'Dwyer, who reviewed a federal database of interviews and academic transcript data from more than 10,000 students at 670 two- and four-year institutions.

At four-year colleges, students who took three or more remedial courses struggled to attain a bachelor's degree when compared to similar peers who took no remedial courses, according to the researchers, who presented their findings today at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in Philadelphia.

Among students at two-year colleges, taking developmental education courses was associated with better odds of earning an associate's degree but no higher within six years of enrollment, Shields and O'Dwyer discovered, drawing on data collected from college students between 2004 and 2009.

When the researchers looked at the relationship of taking remedial courses to the chances of two-year college students ultimately earning a bachelor's degree, the potential benefits of the courses

disappeared. Taking three or more remedial courses at the two-year college level was negatively associated with attaining a bachelor's degree, they found. Developmental education may divert them from transferring to complete a higher degree.

In addition, the results of remedial courses varied from one two-year institution to another, which may reflect the diversity of new developmental course models arising during the period of the study, according to O'Dwyer, a specialist in [educational research](#), measurement, and evaluation.

Shields said the results show that remedial education at the two-year level is not a hindrance in the same way as it seems to be at the four-year level, but researchers need to delve into which types of programs are the most effective and why.

"We need further investigation of the ingredients for success at those colleges where taking developmental coursework doesn't hold students back from finishing an associate's degree," Shields said. "Are there institutional policies that do a better job of matching [students](#) to courses? Are innovations in developmental curriculum paying off? The picture looks a lot more complex than in the four-year setting."

More information: O'Dwyer and Shields will present their paper "College Completion and Remedial Education: Do Institutional Characteristics Make a Difference?" at 8:15 a.m. on Monday, April 7. For more information about the session, please see [this link](#).

Provided by Boston College

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