
Florida's College Preparatory Program: The Access Challenge

By: David Armstrong, Executive Director, State Board of Community Colleges

On behalf of the members of the State Board of Community Colleges, I wish to thank the members of the TaxWatch Board for their encouragement and support during the past year. We look forward to discussing further a variety of partnership ideas. Specifically, I appreciate the chance to discuss the College Preparatory Program (remedial) in our colleges with the TaxWatch membership. The Legislature, upon the recommendation of the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, renamed the "remedial" program in our colleges and universities in the early 1980's. The name, College Preparatory, was chosen to reflect the fact that the skills being taught are normally those never attempted in high school, and they are indeed the "pre-college" skills needed to succeed in college credit coursework. The Legislature also took two significant reform actions as part of this change:

- 1. College Preparatory (remedial) classes were to be non-credit only and they were not to count toward college graduation;***
- 2. College Preparatory instruction was limited to the 28 community colleges, with the exception of FAMU (in recognition of its strong program).***

These changes assured program integrity and also recognized the unique ability of the community colleges to serve these students in the most cost-effective manner. Several states are currently considering limiting such instruction to their community colleges. Further, the changes assured that our community colleges were able to maintain their open-door admissions policy in the face of a large number of returning adults and recent high school graduates who were not college-ready as measured by the entry-level placement (ELT) test.

Florida's well known and effective 2+2 model of baccalaureate access rests on the understanding that college credit community college classes must possess the same rigor as college credit classes in our state universities and four-year independent colleges. The College Preparatory program allows that to occur. Students are indeed admitted through the open door, but all 28 community colleges utilize the same entry-level placement test

to assure that students are "college-ready." If they are not, college preparatory classes are provided to bring such students up to the level needed to succeed in the credit classes. This assures student access, but it also assures that college faculty members can teach credit classes with an expectation that all of their students have the potential to succeed.

The total cost of remediation at Florida's twenty-eight public community colleges for 1996-97 was \$60,676,094¹. The State's portion of this was \$32,124,353 or 53%. Students paid \$25,069,262 or 41% with the remaining \$3,482,479 or 6% coming from other sources. Furthermore, the State paid only \$10,334,084 for students who graduated from Florida's public high schools within the past three years. The State's contribution to this program must also be placed in the context of the total State support for the Community College System (CCS). The \$32 million spent on remediation represents 4.5% of the \$711 million appropriated to the CCS by the State for 1996-97.

The need for "college-ready" public school graduates is not a Florida issue. Milton Spann, in a recent ECS report has noted that:

Helping academically deficient students prepare themselves for college has been a feature of American education since Harvard opened its doors in 1636. As far back as 1828, the Yale report called for an end to the admission of students with defective preparation (Brier, 1984). However, Charles Elliott took the opposing view in his 1869 inaugural address as President of Harvard: "The American college is obligated to supplement the American school. Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give the college must supply" (Spann & McCrimmon, p. 163). These conflicting views reflect the historical debate over the role of higher education, a debate as hotly contested today as it was in the 17th Century. Regardless of the debate, the practical community-based education offered by the community college has prevailed, and that includes remediation.

National Center for Education Statistics (1995) reports that approximately 35-40% of first-year community college students need one or more courses in remediation and that three quarters of all remedial students are found at the community college. Until such time that the public schools enable most students to function at the college entry-level, community colleges will be expected to bring the average high school graduate, whose academic competence is approximately 8th -grade level, to the level necessary to successfully enter college.²

In addition, David Breneman of the University of Virginia (1997) points out that, if only one-third of the students currently taking at least one remedial course were to earn a bachelor's degree, they would generate more than 74 billion in federal taxes and 13 billion in state and local taxes while costing the taxpayer about one billion to remediate. Furthermore, Breneman states that the graduation rate for remedial students would have to drop below the 1% level before taxpayers would see a net loss on investment. If

Breneman's scenario is accurate, investment in remediation is a sound economic decision for the state and nation.

David Wessel agrees with Breneman's scenario, and in a recent Wall Street Journal article stated:

Indeed the fact that more than two million people are taking remedial courses on college campuses could be seen as a hopeful sign. Yes, it would be far better if those students had learned the basics 'm high school. But they didn't. And if colleges can teach them to read, write, and add, two million more people will have a shot at decent jobs, with the obvious benefits to themselves and society.³

The CCS has been investigating the relation between high school courses and ELT scores in an effort to provide the Division of Public Schools data on what courses are needed to be successful in the CCS. A recent study by Dr. Mike Resnick of the view of Florida shows that the courses needed to pass the Entry Level Placement Test are on the same level as those needed for entry into the SUS. Many CCS students do not decide to come to college until late into their high school career and have not taken the full college preparatory curriculum by the time they graduate. This lack of preparation is not the fault of either the high school or the student, but it is something that must be corrected prior to a student being ready for college-level work. Indeed, an often-heard remark is that College Preparatory community college students are not really being "remediated." They are being provided instruction in areas that they never encountered in their high school course work.

The collaboration between the Division of Public Schools and the CCS has resulted in the implementation of a number of strategies designed to help students prepare for college. Many of these fall under the state level initiative known as "K-16." Enumerated below are a few of the cooperative activities and programs currently taking place at the state level.

- (1) Common Placement Test linked to K- 12 Accountability; CPT/FCAT linked with 10th grade plans;
- (2) Implementation of College Ready Diploma which requires students to take college prep track and pass the CPT or its equivalent to qualify for the diploma;
- (3) Public Schools and Workforce Development representatives have been added to the Articulation Coordinating Committee;
- (4) Development and distribution of the *Recommended Guidelines for Dual Enrollment Interinstitutional Articulation Agreements*;

- (5) Communication of college academic and testing requirements to economically disadvantaged students and their parents via newspapers, radio stations, community centers, and literature that specifically targets these groups;
- (6) Annual distribution of the 8th grade letter to students and their parents recommending students take the college prep track in high school as a way to decrease the incident of remediation;
- (7) Appointment of K-16 Liaisons at each community college to provide link/contact person between community colleges and school districts;
- (8) Annual K-16 Articulation Activities Survey conducted to determine collaborative activities between public schools and community colleges;
- (9) Annual collection and evaluation of dual enrollment interinstitutional articulation agreements;
- (10) Recognition of Articulation Coordinating Committee as the statewide K-16 Council (State Board Rule is being amended to indicate this);
- (11) Development and distribution of a Student Transfer Guide. This ACC project is near completion;
- (12) College Reach-Out Program (CROP) which is a consortium of institutions that mentor low income and educationally disadvantage students in grades 6-12 who otherwise would not seek postsecondary education; and
- (13) Annual development and distribution of the *Florida Articulation Summary* which examines the various measures that indicate how well Florida is doing in articulation.

Furthermore, information has been shared with Legislative staff showing that the major group of remedial students is not recent public high school graduates, but rather students who have been out of high school for at least three year⁴.

One would be hard pressed to find more caring and concerned faculty than those who teach remedial courses in the CCS. This faculty has conducted their own research on the characteristics of successful teaching methods. Examples include the work done by Dr. Sally Search at Tallahassee Community College and *Transactional Writing Empowering Women and Girls to Win at Mathematics*, a National Science Foundation grant under the direction of Dr. Suzanne Austin at Miami-Dade Community College⁵. Further, directors of remediation at TCC and Santa Fe have established programs with area high schools such as the Connections Program between TCC and Godby High School in Leon County. The work at Santa Fe has resulted in a steady decline of prior-year high school graduates needing remediation from 61% in Fall 1993 to 43% in Fall 1998⁶.

The "Open Door" was a major idea behind the creation, in the 1950's, of the CCS, i.e., any student with a high school diploma would be allowed to enter. That "Open Door" is just as open today as it was then. The CCS determines the qualification level of its students after they are admitted to a college and allows them to immediately begin taking any courses for which they are qualified. The only requirement for admission to a degree program is successful passing of the Common Placement Test which is done, not to keep people from progressing toward a degree, but rather to ensure they have the skills necessary for college-level work.

The National Center for Education Statistics has recently implemented a new report known as the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS). This report tracks a cohort of full-time degree-seeking students for three years and determines how many graduated, how many completed at least 60 hours, how many were still enrolled and how many were no longer enrolled. The CCS showed a success rate of 72%.

The 1997 Accountability data show that of the students who enrolled in any level remediation class, 62% passed the highest level reading class, 59% passed the highest level writing and 45% passed the highest level mathematics class⁷. This information is based upon only a two-year tracking period and actually undercounts the final outcome of the cohort due to the high percentage of part-time students in the CCS. Further, when these students are tracked for an additional two years, over 5,300 had earned at least 18 hours in college-level work. Clearly, in order to earn college-level hours, one must be enrolled in college level courses. In-house tracking of cohorts based upon entry-level test results shows that, once students successfully complete the highest level remedial course in an area, they enroll in college-level courses at approximately the same rate as students who originally passed that section of the tests⁸. This same research has shown that more than one-in-three of those who enroll progress to college-level courses; and more than four-out-of-five (80%) of those students who successfully complete remediation enroll in college-level courses.

Once students have successfully completed all required remediation, they are just as qualified to continue on toward the baccalaureate as students who originally passed the entry-level test. The overall four-year AA graduation rate, as reported in the *1997 Accountability Data Tables*, was 28%. The success rate for these students, i.e., the percent graduated plus those academically qualified to continue, was 80%. Students who had successfully completed the required college preparatory courses graduated at a rate of 21% with a success rate of 82%. One would expect a lower graduation rate since these students must spend extra time in college preparatory course and thus take longer to finish. The average GPA earned by former College Preparatory students once they transferred to the SUS was 2.84 compared to the 2.86 of non-preparatory students⁹.

In-house research done in connection with the provision of HB 1545 that students would pay 100% of cost for any remedial class they were taking a second time found that only 14% of students enrolled in remedial courses in Spring 1998 were repeating courses they had failed in Fall 1997. Further, the percent of students successfully completing a course increased between Fall 1995 and Fall 1997.

As noted in a recent issue of *Ideas in Action*, legislation was enacted in both the 1997 and 1998 legislative sessions to encourage additional options to further enhance the readiness of students to succeed in credit classes

The 1997 legislation stated that "Each board of trustees shall establish policies that notify students about, and place students into, adult basic education, adult secondary education, or other instructional programs that provide students with alternatives to traditional college-preparatory instruction, including private provider instruction." Section 240.321 F.S. Following passage of that legislation, the DCC sent out Memorandum Number 97-95 clarifying the intent of both the section quoted above and the section related to forming partnerships with private industries.

The 1998 legislation further stated that "Each board of trustees shall establish policies that notify students about, and place students into, adult basic education, adult secondary education, or other instructional programs that provide students with alternatives to traditional college-preparatory instruction, including private provider instruction. Such notification shall include a written listing or a prominent display of information on alternative remedial options that must be available to each student who scores below college-level in any area on the common placement test. The list or display shall include, but is not limited to, options provided by the community college, adult education programs and programs provided by private sector providers. The college shall not endorse, recommend, evaluate or rank any of the providers. The list of providers or the display materials shall include all those providers that request to be included. The written list must provide students with specific contact information and disclose the full costs of the course tuition, laboratory fees, and instructional materials of each option listed. A student who elects a private provider for remedial instruction is entitled to enroll in up to 12 credits of college-level courses in skill areas other than those for which the student is being remediated. A student is prohibited from enrolling in additional college-level courses until the student scores above the cut-score on all sections of the common placement test." Section 240.321 F. S.

This language was a compromise based, in part, on the work the CCS did with Representative Wise, Representative Sindler, legislative staff members, H&H Publications and their lobbyist Curt Kiser. One of the goals of the compromise was to assure that all vendors are treated equitably in terms of ability to market their program. The DCC recognizes that there are many potential private providers of remedial services. The Division supports partnerships between the colleges and these private providers; however, each college must be able to select the vendor that best meets their needs and that vendor may not be the same one throughout the entire state. In an effort to facilitate this interaction, the DCC is meeting with numerous vendors including ACT, Kaplan and Academic Systems. Providing technology-based access to remedial courses is also under consideration. Discussions are currently underway that would establish some type of RFP process to select the vendor(s) for this form of College Preparatory instruction. The DCC has also sent out a survey requesting information related to how the individual colleges are implementing this section of the law.

The involvement of the private sector with our college programs, and specifically the College Preparatory program, is nothing new. Miami-Dade Community College has worked with IBM and a number of our colleges on software evaluation related to College Preparatory instruction for a number of years (Project Synergy). Brevard Community College, and more recently several others, worked on computer based developmental skills programs with Academic Systems Corporation. Some colleges have utilized private vendor programs as components of their College Preparatory programs. Faculty members and colleges have worked with publishing companies and test preparation firms in such areas as CLAST preparation and minority recruitment and retention efforts.

More recently, the State Board has discussed the possibility of statewide private vendor assistance with such organizations as Kaplan and Invest Learning. While the developmental educators in our 28 colleges have much to be proud of with the current program, the colleges are open to creative partnerships to further enhance "access" to postsecondary education. This is reflected in both the Access and Partnership Challenge in our 1999 - 2000 budget request.

Recent legislation has also opened the door to all 28 community colleges offering adult education. Consistent with the 1997 law, several colleges are looking at placing students in these programs if they score particularly low on the Entry Level Placement Test.

The 1997 Accountability Report (Measure 4 Part 1) shows that 61% of Fall 1994 FTIC degree-seeking students need some remediation (latest available Accountability data). The 1997-98 FTIC Readiness Report shows that 64% of incoming prior-year, high school degree-seeking students need at least one course in remediation. The 1997-98 report is based upon higher cut scores than the 1994 report.

Only about 25% of AA entering students need remediation in more than one area. The remaining entering students either need no remediation or need remediation in only one area. Whether a student needs one or more courses in an area depends upon the score earned on the entry-level test and the curriculum structure of the community college.

In conclusion, the State Board will continue to explore any positive option to improve this important opportunity program. The March 1998 issue of *Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY* showed Florida 47th in the nation with a Chance for College by Age 19 rate of 29.1%. This rate is over ten percentage points lower than the national average of 39.7%. The rate is the product of high school graduation rate and college continuation rate, and is based upon data extracted from the National Center for Educational Statistics. The best way to increase the chance for college is to increase both the high school graduation rate and the college continuation rate.

The best way to accomplish an increase in the high school graduation rate this is through the Pre-K-16 initiative that is already underway in the State. This initiative encourages the various educational sectors to work together to produce the labor force needed by the State. Florida is fortunate to have already set in motion many of the needed components of this process. For example, the public schools have been receiving feedback for several

years on how well their students do on the community college placement test. This information assists the schools as they seek to reduce the need for remediation by their recent graduates.

An objective contained in *A Strategic Plan for the Millennium 1998-2003*, the latest strategic plan, is to increase the percentage of prior-year high school students attending the CCS from the current 30 to 45. The best way to increase the college continuation rate is through marketing and developing support systems. Marketing is needed to inform the public about the opportunities available in postsecondary institutions, while support systems are needed to help students remain enrolled once they are on campus. This same *Strategic Plan* discusses several areas where support strategies for returning students have been developed. These include such items as financial aid, childcare grants, displaced homemakers grants, one-stop centers, and evening classes. The only way the State is going to be able to increase the educational level of its citizens is to recognize the totality of support systems necessary for people to return to postsecondary education.

We have worked with and applauded the legislative and Department of Education efforts to strengthen high school graduation requirements. Each of our colleges is currently completing a "remedial reduction plan" with area school districts. We are prepared to assist the districts through early intervention programs, early placement testing, and by providing teachers in-service opportunities as they seek to improve their performance on their accountability goal related to "college readiness." The public and private universities, the public schools, the private sector and our colleges must truly be a pre-K-16 partnership to reduce the need for remedial course work. In the meantime, the College Preparatory program assures that Florida residents have "access" and an effective 2+2 program. Again, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important program.

About the Author

J. David Armstrong, Jr. is the Executive Director of the Florida Community College System. Mr. Armstrong has held progressively responsible leadership positions with the Florida Community College System since 1994. He began his community college service as the Assistant to the President for Public and Governmental Affairs at Pensacola Junior College. He moved to the Division of Community Colleges in 1988, where he served as an educational policy director, deputy assistant executive director, and assistant executive director prior to being named executive director in May 1998. Mr. Armstrong has shown his dedication to community needs throughout his distinguished career. He has been a marketing/public relations director for a private, federally funded ride-sharing and energy conservation project in Birmingham, Alabama; and a newspaper reporter, editor and associate publisher of two community newspapers in Foley and Gulf Shores, Alabama. A native of Alabama, he holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Montevallo, a Master of Science in Management degree from Troy State University, and is currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Management and Leadership at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida.

ENDNOTES

1. The Division of Community Colleges. Cost Analysis for 1996-97.
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4. The Division of Community Colleges. "Community College Remediation" tables, 7/31/98.
5. *Transactional Writing: Empowering Women and Girls to Win at Mathematics* National Science Foundation Grant EPWG:HRD 955-4188, Dr. Suzanne Austin, PI.
6. E-mail correspondence with Ms. Patricia Smittle, Director of Remedial Services, Santa Fe Community Colleges.
7. The Division of Community Colleges. *Accountability Report* data displays for 1997.
8. The Division of Community Colleges office of Educational Services and Research "College Remediation Program - A Background Paper" March 24, 1997.
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