

Questions of Obligation, Cost Effectiveness, and Efficiency: University Remedial Programs

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Many colleges have embarked on a two tiered matriculation path: tier one is designed for students who are prepared for college level studies and tier two is fashioned for students who are not appropriately equipped to begin college level work. Some schools decline to offer a bifurcated path and insist that their students commence studies at regular college levels. Schools offering remedial programs do so for three major reasons: (1) a sense of moral obligation to college applicants who lack some skills necessary to succeed at college but who, it is believed, can achieve college readiness with finite, short term remedial assistance; (2) a sense of guilt, on the part of some teacher education institutions, that the very unprepared students who apply to colleges have been taught by teachers these schools have trained; and (3) as a way of maintaining or boosting enrollments in times of national enrollment decline.

Remedial education impacts an institution's mission and workplace reputation for its alumni, its budget, its faculty morale, and its students' self image. Some institutions see their mission as including remedial education to students who are capable of overcoming deficiencies with remedial courses, special advising, and other student support services offered to poorly prepared students. Such an institutional mission interpretation assumes remedial education as an obligation to its students. Other colleges assume no such responsibility; they do not deny that ill prepared would-be students deserve to be well prepared, but that responsibility is seen as resting somewhere else.

For those schools who assume the budgetary constraints, staffing responsibilities, and opportunity costs of providing remedial education to college students, responsibilities to demonstrate through careful, public record keeping and proven student performance achievements that remedial education indeed works is paramount. If student performance does not demonstrate remedial success and/or if careful, cogent records demonstrating remedial success are not kept and made public, remedial education opponents will sway public opinion against such assistance. For every dollar spent failing to upgrade a student who was not ready upon admission to begin college level work, a dollar could have been spent improving the educational experience for a student who was prepared. The majority of remedially admitted students must be successfully aided by program efforts to justify the costs.

Not all ill prepared students can be helped by college based remedial programs. Remedial programs have finite resources, have limited time to improve student skills, and therefore, need to be highly selective as to which students are chosen to receive such remedial assistance. Colleges must deny remedial aid to students whose knowledge and skills are so deficient that basic remedial aid cannot be expected to successfully remedy these deficiencies in a reasonable time frame.

For those who feel guilty about ill prepared students and who assume [rightly or wrongly] that part of the blame for this situation is due to ill prepared teachers [some of whom may have been prepared by that same college], the remedy for such a plight is not in offering remedial aid as a substitute or remedy for poor common school education; remedy lies in improving teacher education and certification standards. Two unintended ends that remedial education seems to accomplish is to excuse poor common school learning/educating and giving would-be college students the view that they can slack off and catch up later in remedial classes. Selective and demanding student selection for remedial assistance, remediation progress, and retention in remedial programs is essential to assure these unintended messages are not promulgated.

Significant public opinion at three college communities where the author has taught and where remedial programs were in force was: a major reason why so much remedial work is offered is to enroll more students than colleges could attract if remedial programs were not in place. In short, there is a sizable and cynical view that remediation is more economically than pedagogically driven. Sizable proportions of the faculties at colleges where the author has taught and many faculty members approached at national and regional conferences hold similar cynical views. This is where careful, detailed, and public remediation records of success or failure become vital. Only with proven, disclosed records and demonstrated student performance can a remediation program sustain credibility and secure public support.

College alumni deserve to keep the image of their degrees pristine. When public opinion regarding academic standards, institutional motives, and program quality is tainted or eroded by suspicions centered on remedial program honesty, expenditures, and emphasis, degree holders from that school have been robbed of an entitled benefit of their matriculation. We need to openly discuss, debate, and face up to successes and failures regarding college remedial education and we need to assure well prepared students that remedial efforts will not

dilute their degrees; to assure students admitted to remedial programs that these efforts are designed to and are legitimately predicted to succeed; and we must show the taxpayers and endowers that those remedial programs now in force are worth the efforts and costs. Successful remedial programs are morally, pedagogically, and economically defensible; remedial programs that are not successful are a sham and should be quickly terminated.