Getting Developmental Education Up to Speed: A Look at MDRC's Research

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When they arrive at community colleges or open-enrollment universities, most students take placement exams in English and mathematics to determine whether they are ready for college-level courses. Students with low scores are referred to developmental — remedial — courses. Forty percent of all entering college students and over half of entering community college students must take at least one remedial course.[1] Fewer than half make it through developmental education.[2]

This problem in developmental education is one reason why college completion rates in the United States remain stubbornly low, and policymakers and college administrators know that solving it is of major importance. When MDRC reviewed the literature on developmental education in 2011, however, it found little rigorous research on what reforms actually work. Since then, MDRC has moved aggressively to fill the knowledge gap, publishing nine studies related to developmental education, with more studies poised to produce rigorous evidence soon. This Issue Focus provides an overview of how this growing evidence base informs four areas of reform. The experimental studies described here assign students at random to a program group or a control group, the most reliable design to estimate a program's effects. Several of the programs were found to improve outcomes for developmental education students, and one increased graduation rates substantially.

REFORM TYPE 1: BUILDING SKILLS AND ALIGNING CONTENT WITH PROGRAMS OF STUDY

Findings: MDRC has been studying a new developmental math model in the Texas community college system that aims to help students complete a college-level math course in one academic year — The New Mathways Project. The new model has three pathways: statistics for students in the social sciences; quantitative reasoning for students in the humanities; and algebra for students interested in the hard sciences, computers, or engineering. According to an MDRC study, 20 Texas community colleges were offering at least one of these new courses as of fall 2014, and nonexperimental results suggested that students completed college-level math at higher rates.

New research: In 2015, MDRC started a random assignment study at four colleges to estimate the program's effects on college success. Early findings will be available in 2017.

REFORM TYPE 2: BOOSTING SKILLS BEFORE STUDENTS ENTER COLLEGE

Findings: MDRC, as part of The National Center for Postsecondary Research, conducted a random assignment study of eight summer bridge programs in Texas that offered students accelerated, focused learning opportunities between high school and college. Students in the program group passed their first college-level math and writing courses at higher rates than those in the control group, though evidence of the effects faded by the end of two years.

New research: CUNY has also developed a prematriculation program called CUNY Start that condenses the time students spend preparing for college-level English and math into one semester. In spring 2015, MDRC began enrolling students for a random assignment study at four CUNY colleges.

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[1] Paul A. Attewell, David E. Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey, "New Evidence on College Remediation," *Journal of Higher Education* 77, 5 (2006): 886-924.

[2] Thomas Bailey, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung-Woo Cho, "Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges," *Economics of Education Review* 29, 2 (2010): 255-270.

REFORM TYPE 3: SPEEDING STUDENTS' PROGRESS THROUGH DEVELOPMENTAL COURSES

Findings: MDRC has written case studies of two community college efforts to revamp developmental math curricula. Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, developed a model that compresses a traditional 16-week developmental math course into 8 weeks. Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, divided each developmental math course into modules, hoping to make it easier for students to skip content they have already mastered. Nonexperimental data suggested promising trends for these programs.

New research: MDRC is conducting a random assignment study at Tarrant County College to determine whether students pass its modular courses more quickly than standard developmental math. Implementation and early impact findings should be published in 2016.

REFORM TYPE 4: EXTRA SUPPORT

Findings: MDRC has studied performance-based scholarships — scholarships that are contingent on student performance — in seven states, and found that they produce modest long-term impacts on academic progress and graduation. The findings appear to be consistent across programs with varying designs and for all types of students, including those who require remediation. In one program, in Tampa, Florida, MDRC worked with Hillsborough Community College to offer a scholarship for developmental math students that included help in an on-campus Math Lab. In another, scholarships without additional services were offered to developmental education students at two New York City community colleges.

MDRC has also tested "learning communities," in which groups of students are placed together in two or more courses with aligned content, and given extra support. In a demonstration project at six colleges, MDRC found that the programs increased the credits that developmental education students earned by a small amount (half a credit) in the programs' targeted subjects of English or math, and increased the overall credits they earned by the same small amount.

The most successful program that MDRC has studied in a decade of research on college reforms combines elements of these approaches and several others, including enhanced student services. CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) gives developmental education students a tuition waiver to fill any gap between financial aid and tuition and fees, free MetroCards for use on public transportation (contingent on participation in essential program services), and free use of textbooks. ASAP also requires students to enroll full time; provides them with comprehensive guidance from an adviser with a small caseload along with enhanced career services and tutoring; puts them in linked courses for the first year; and offers a seminar on setting goals and study skills. MDRC found that the program nearly doubled the three-year graduation rate.

New research: MDRC and CUNY are now leading a project to replicate and evaluate ASAP in three community colleges in Ohio. Early results from that evaluation will be available in 2017.

LOOKING AHEAD

MDRC has launched a national center to study developmental education, in partnership with the Community College Research Center at Teacher's College, Columbia University. The center is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education. In addition to the evaluation of the New Mathways Project described above, the center will conduct a national survey of developmental education policies and practices, and a rigorous evaluation of alternate systems of remedial assessment and placement. In the coming year, MDRC will publish results and updates on several of the studies described here. To keep up with MDRC's projects in developmental education, visit www.mdrc.org/issue/focus/developmental-education.