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## Commentary

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### **Introducing a Remedial Program That Actually Works**

*By Kevin Carey*

*The man who ranges in No Man's Land*

*Is dogged by the shadows on either hand*

— James H. Knight-Adkin, 1917

Remediation is the no man's land of American education. Every year we send hundreds of thousands of young men and women over the top, across a rocky landscape strewn with pedagogical barbed wire and the remains of those who tried and failed before them. We know, without a doubt, that many of those eager and unsuspecting students won't make it. Yet we send them anyway, because there's always another fresh class of recruits to enroll.

The cost to the nation in lost time and resources is astounding. The lofty goal of increasing the ranks of college graduates, voiced by President Obama and others, will not be met if we can't find a better way.

Thankfully, some people are doing exactly that, today. And you'll often find them in places like Cleveland State —not the university in Ohio, but the community college in Cleveland, Tenn., about 30 miles northeast of Chattanooga.

Cleveland State Community College is a typical American institution of higher education. Meaning: (a) It's publicly supported and struggles to raise money; (b) admissions standards aren't stringent; (c) most students come from local high schools; and (d) many students don't arrive prepared for college-level work. It's easy to forget, given how much sway elite institutions and their graduates hold, that the Cleveland States of this country educate most of our college students.

Every year nearly two-thirds of Cleveland State freshman are forced to take at least one remedial course. (Again, that is not unusual. A 2004 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that more than 40 percent of all students —and over 60 percent of community-college students —needed remediation.) Until recently nearly 50 percent of the remedial students at Cleveland State were failing those courses, greatly increasing their odds of dropping out.

The problem was all too clear to the chair of the mathematics department, John Squires. "If half your students fail," he says, "you can't call that a success." So he decided to try something new. In spring 2008 he put in place the math "emporium model" popularized by the National Center for Academic Transformation. Instead of attending traditional lectures in basic math, elementary algebra, and intermediate

algebra, remedial students come to a large computer lab where they solve math problems and, when they need help, work with on-site faculty members and tutors. Courses are arranged in weekly modules with accompanying quizzes that can be retaken until students are ready for the next step.

Remediation can be difficult and intimidating. One student named Leslie said in an e-mail message, "I hated being called on in class and made a fool of. Whether it was meant that way or not, that's what it was. With math there are lots of times I would say if I could just see that worked one more time I think I would understand it. Math Lab let me do that. Working at my own speed gave me incentive to go forward and finish."

The results were impressive. The percentage of remedial students at Cleveland State earning at least a C in the three math courses jumped from 55 percent to 72 percent. Of course, pass rates are always subject to changing academic standards. But when the college compared students' test results in basic math with common items on final exams from the previous five years, the proportion answered correctly increased from 73 to 86 percent.

And when remedial students went on to college-level math, their success continued—completion rates increased from 71 to 81 percent, even as rates for other students stayed flat. For the first time, students coming from the remedial sequence earned higher grades than their peers did. Enrollment in college-level math at Cleveland State is up 42 percent this spring. Now the English department is looking to do the same.

Other people in higher education might protest that they, too, could produce such results if only they had enough money to pay for needed reform. And it's true that remediation is often shamefully underfinanced, relegated to a budgetary backwater by administrators more interested in attracting star students and building prestige.

But Cleveland State's newer, better program is less expensive than the old one. Shifting from a lecture to lab model means fewer personnel costs. At the same time, the college is serving more students. Scheduling used to be a constant headache as administrators struggled to provide enough course sections, particularly in small satellite locations. Now the overall number of students served per faculty member is up 23 percent. Instead of grading quizzes, professors have more time for direct contact with students.

Students, too, are saving time and money. Previously they had to take each remedial course in sequence, regardless of how fast they learned. Now they can jump into the sequence at the right place and move as fast as they're able. As many as 46 students—Leslie was one of them—completed two or more math courses in the fall 2008 semester. Some students finished all three.

The whole project has gone so well that Cleveland State is planning to transform its entire math department. "There's not a single thing we do that will look like it did two years ago," says Squires. And the college won't be alone. It's part of a statewide pilot project of the National Center for Academic Transformation that also includes Chattanooga State Technical Community College and Austin Peay State University. Officials in Arizona, Mississippi, and New York have similar efforts under way.

Serving more students and improving academic outcomes while saving resources in the bargain sounds like

the ultimate better mousetrap for higher education. And with the economic crisis throwing balance sheets into turmoil, more colleges will undoubtedly look to those kinds of innovative solutions.

But it would be a mistake to believe that clear evidence of more learning for less money will be enough to spark widespread improvement. For all its general liberalism, higher education is staunchly conservative when it comes to trying new things. "It's amazing how little we want to change," says Squires, "even when we're obviously not doing a good job."

Remedial education is a particular challenge. The K-12 system considers every student who graduates and then enrolls in college as a success —anything that happens afterward is someone else's problem. The higher-education system considers every remedial student as a product of K-12 failure, and therefore someone else's problem. The only "someone else" left is the student, dogged by the shadows of two systems that refuse to take responsibility for the educational killing zone that lies between them.

Colleges aren't wrong to observe that many high schools chronically fail to prepare college-bound students for the rigors of higher education. But that problem won't be solved anytime soon, and many colleges fail to do even obvious things like communicate their remedial placement standards to the local high schools that send them students.

Many institutions would rather pretend that remedial courses don't even exist. That attitude is a product of our odd habit of judging institutional quality by how smart students are before they matriculate, not after. So the courses are marginalized, organizationally and even physically. Class sizes are often large and instructors underpaid. Frequently, remedial students are left out of success measures altogether — they're not really "college students" at all, the thinking goes. Colleges are hardly ever ranked, financially supported, or held accountable on the basis of their success serving remedial students. That makes those students an excellent revenue source: cheap to educate and costless to fail.

Cleveland State —along with a growing number of other colleges that have used the national center's type of course transformation, small learning communities, and other methods to help remedial students who desperately need a good education —shows that we can and should do much better. Rather than continue to tolerate attrition rates that would have made a World War I general weep, we can help many more students through the first, most difficult step on the journey into higher education and the opportunity that lies beyond.

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