

U.S. NEWS

Remedial College Courses Face a New Test

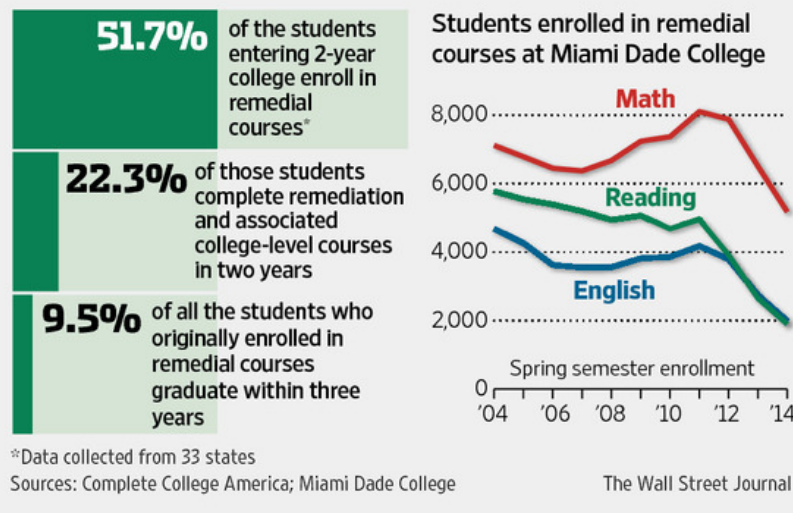
Law Lets Students Decide Whether They Need Basic Classes

By CAROLINE PORTER

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Fundamental Challenge

With remedial courses at community colleges showing disappointing results, Florida is pushing to move students out of these noncredit classes.



MIAMI—A new state law here is trying a novel approach to determine whether incoming students are prepared to move on to college-level coursework: let them decide for themselves.

More than half of community-college students in the U.S. take at least one remedial class, according to the Community College Research Center, at the Teachers College of Columbia University. This typically comes after students fail to pass proficiency exams in math, reading or writing.

But educators and policy makers increasingly are concerned that shunting students immediately into catch-up classes—which students must pay for even though they garner no credits—deters too many from completing their studies. States are trying alternatives, from adding basic tutorials to college-level classes to weighing high-school grades in addition to test scores.

Florida has gone further by making placement tests and remedial classes entirely optional for students who recently graduated from a state public high school or are active-duty members of the military. Proponents see the law, which took effect in January, as a way to give students more control by letting them decide how big a challenge to take on and where to devote their resources. But some educators—including Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón—fear the legislature went too far.

"You're not able to test students [who opt out of the remedial program] and know where they are," said Mr. Padrón, who expects the failure rate will go up as more students move into subjects unprepared. "When you don't have the tools to guide them, it's very, very difficult."

In a white-walled classroom here at Miami Dade College, students on a recent afternoon pondered the absolute value of 19. After a silence, instructor Carlos Rodriguez offered a hint: "How far is it from 0?"

Such algebra class work, which is typically done at the high-school level, is front and center at this community college, where about 12,000 students enrolled in remedial classes last spring. But enrollment in catch-up classes has fallen about 24% since the legislation took effect this year.



Students like Belcys Lopez are bypassing remedial courses under a new law. *Cristobal Herrera for The Wall Street Journal*

Belcys Lopez, an 18-year-old native of Cuba who graduated from a Florida public high school, was placed in a remedial reading class this semester. But she exercised her new right to take a college-level English class.

School officials "tell you to take the remedial class, but I feel like I was prepared to take the college-level class," she said, adding she passed her first test this semester. "I would just go to the [remedial] class and sit there. They would be telling me information that I already know."



Yuria Orihuela, right, an adjunct professor at Miami Dade College, teaches Joyce Greene in a remedial math class. *Cristobal Herrera for The Wall Street Journal*

Some experts say concerns about remedial education aren't all justified and warn that the consequences of doing away with a program that typically is aimed at students from low-income and minority backgrounds are unknown.

"These students typically have low graduation rates from college," said Hunter Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education. "We have not learned how to serve them best yet."

However, State Sen. Bill Galvano, a Republican and chairman of the appropriations subcommittee on education, said the system was a "dead-end process" that needed radical surgery. Students often dropped out with debt and little progress toward a degree, he said.

Only about 22% of students complete remediation and the associated college-level classes in two years, according to Complete College America, a nonprofit focused on college completion rates.

"The idea is not that students sink or swim," Mr. Galvano said. "It's that state colleges will work with other means to get them across the finish line."

Miami Dade College, the largest U.S. community college with 176,000 students, has been experimenting for years with remedial-teaching alternatives. They include "just-in-time" remedial coursework, which embeds backup learning in credit-bearing classes, and accelerated learning, which compresses remedial classes into tighter formats.

In the past year, Miami Dade has added 16 advisers to bolster one-on-one counseling for students, and it plans to add nine more.

Some teachers worry that won't be enough. This semester, about 60% of Miami Dade students entering the system who placed at remedial level are taking college-level English and math classes instead.

Brooke Bovee, who teaches college-level English composition and literature, says just six of her 26 students came in prepared for the class, noting that for four of her students, this will be their third try. For an additional six students, this is their second attempt.

Now, with the new state law, she also has at least one student who tested into a remedial class but chose the higher-level class instead.

"A lot of discussion among English faculty is how to keep standards high," said Ms. Bovee, who acknowledges the need for changes to the system. "Students ask me what a paragraph is now. What's next? Maybe, what's a sentence?"

But Jakeisha Thompson, who teaches remedial and college-level math at Miami Dade, said the system will offer more flexibility to students who enter at different levels of understanding.

"Sometimes the challenge [in remedial classes] is that I may lose students because they get bored waiting for the middle part of the class," she said. "On one hand, it is good because it's reform, and on the other hand, there are still those who need traditional help."

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