



TESTIMONY

Combining Opportunity and Obligation to Overcome Multiple Student Barriers in College

Testimony of Alexander Mayer, Deputy Director, Postsecondary Education, MDRC, Before the New Jersey State Assembly Higher Education Committee

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Thank you, Chair Jasey, Vice-Chair Karabinchak, and members of the Assembly. My name is Alex Mayer. I am the Deputy Director for Postsecondary Education at MDRC. MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization. We are dedicated to finding what works to improve the lives of low-income people. In Postsecondary Education, we evaluate existing programs and policies, and we help develop and test new programs that are informed by research. I am also the co-Principal Investigator for the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, or CAPR. CAPR is a national center that was established to study developmental education. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences and led by MDRC and the Community College Research Center (CCRC).

Millions of students who enroll in college are assessed as not ready for college-level classes in at least one subject area. These students must take and pass developmental, or remedial, classes before they can enroll at the college level in those subjects. In New Jersey and across the United States, around two-thirds of all community college students and around a third of students at four-year colleges require developmental education. The majority never complete their developmental coursework or earn a degree. Several factors drive these low completion rates: many students are underprepared academically; traditional instructional practices are not effective for many students; and nonacademic barriers, like work and financial difficulties, can get in the way.

I would like to emphasize three main points today:

1. Developmental education is a major challenge facing low-income college students in New Jersey and across the country.
2. Students face a variety of barriers, but there is a lot of innovation in postsecondary institutions and growing evidence about what works to overcome those barriers.
3. The strongest programs are comprehensive programs that combine opportunity and obligation to address multiple student barriers.

Most of the research findings I’m going to discuss today are from randomized controlled trials. In a randomized controlled trial, students are randomly assigned by lottery either to a new or untested program or to a control group. Students in the control group cannot participate in the program, but they do have access to all other services. Randomized controlled trials are the gold standard of evaluation research. They are the method used in clinical trials to evaluate new medical treatments.

MDRC has evaluated many programs for students in development education. These programs include learning communities, in which groups of students assigned to developmental education are placed together in two or more courses with aligned content and extra support; financial incentives tied to completing developmental courses and meeting with tutors; reforms that seek to accelerate students through developmental education; instructional changes to the way developmental courses are taught; prematriculation programs that seek to improve students’ skills before they enroll in college; and comprehensive programs that combine various strategies. When we look across these studies, we find that most short-term programs produce modest, short-term results. When several programmatic features are combined into an integrated strategy, though, and when

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students experience them semester after semester, the total effect can be dramatic. The most effective program we've studied is the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, known as ASAP, a three-year community college program that was designed, developed, and implemented by the City University of New York (CUNY).

CUNY has integrated a number of different strategies in ASAP. It requires students to enroll full time and it supports them with tuition waivers, textbook vouchers, and free MetroCards for unlimited use on public transportation. Students are encouraged to complete developmental coursework early. ASAP also provides comprehensive support services such as frequent, proactive advising; career development; and tutoring. ASAP is both an opportunity and an obligation for students. In order to receive the MetroCards and other benefits, students must meet with their advisors twice a month and satisfy other program requirements. MDRC's evaluation — based on a sample of students who were all identified as needing developmental education — found that CUNY nearly doubled its three-year graduation rate with ASAP, increasing it from 22 percent to 40 percent.

Given the strength of the findings, CUNY and MDRC partnered to bring the ASAP model to other colleges. Three colleges in Ohio have now replicated the program, and the early results closely align with what we observed at a similar time-point in the ASAP program at CUNY. In addition, two other colleges are now implementing ASAP: Westchester Community College in New York, where we are evaluating the program with a randomized controlled trial, and Skyline Community College in California.

On a separate track from our work on the evaluation of ASAP in New York and Ohio, we have been working with the Detroit Chamber of Commerce, which administers the Detroit Promise program, to add several evidence-based enhancements to the existing program. Those enhancements include campus coaches — who help students navigate academic and nonacademic issues — and modest financial support for students' expenses, which is contingent on meeting with coaches twice a month. By just the second semester of the program, it increased enrollment by 11 percentage points.

Comprehensive programs like these dramatically improve student outcomes, and they do so without changing classroom practices. Despite these sizable improvements, however, many students in the programs still do not succeed, so we continue to test new approaches to fill the gaps, including instructional reforms.

The Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways in Texas is a major instructional reform of developmental math that does change classroom practices. Instead of teaching algebra to all students, the program offers statistics and quantitative pathways that align with students' majors. Instructors also avoid lecturing and focus on more interactive forms of student learning. The early results are promising, improving developmental pass rates by 10 percentage points so far.

Other programs seek to address students' developmental education needs before they enroll in college. These programs share similar features with some of the innovative programs that New Jersey community colleges have created with partner high schools as part of College Readiness Now. MDRC and CCRC evaluated eight such "summer bridge" programs in Texas that offered students accelerated, focused learning opportunities between high school and college. Students in the summer bridge program passed their first college-level courses at higher rates, although the evidence for these higher pass rates later faded. CUNY, though, has developed an intensive prematriculation program called CUNY Start. It condenses the time students spend preparing for college English and math into one semester, integrates content areas like reading and writing using engaging instructional practices, integrates student supports into the classroom, and provides intensive professional development for faculty. MDRC, CUNY, and CCRC will release early results from a study of CUNY Start later this year.

Finally, the standardized tests used to assess college readiness appear to be poor predictors of academic success in college-level courses, possibly placing many students into developmental education unnecessarily. An increasing number of colleges are using high school transcript data and other measures to place students. CAPR is evaluating these practices at several State University of New York colleges, and we will be releasing early results later this year. MDRC is also partnering with CCRC on related research in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

In summary: Developmental education is a major challenge facing low-income college students in New Jersey and across the country. Students face a variety of barriers, but there is a lot of innovation in postsecondary institutions and growing evidence indicating what works. The strongest programs are comprehensive programs that combine opportunity and obligation to address multiple student barriers.

Thank you again.