

Editorial: Bait and Switch College Reforms

By Alexandros M. Goudas

The Obama Administration started the completion agenda in 2009, and educators, legislators, and interest groups rose to the occasion. A postsecondary reform movement began in 2010 and is rapidly spreading across the nation. No facet of higher education, especially community colleges, has been left unchanged. In fact, there has probably been more experimentation in community colleges in the last decade than at any other point in their more than century-long history.

Clearly it is laudable to attempt to improve graduation rates at postsecondary institutions. However, the unknown part of the story is that completion rates have barely budged since the reform movement began, and, worse yet, due to hasty changes, the net effect has been that millions of at-risk students across the nation now have less opportunity and access in higher education than before. That is correct: no increase in graduation rates and fewer opportunities for underprepared students, students of color, and poor students.

And all of this has been done in the name of sound research. Intentionally or not, hundreds of institutions—indeed many entire state systems—have been baited by studies of reform models showing higher success rates, but what they ultimately implemented was switched into reforms that have not been studied. The net effect has been reduced opportunity and access, with no gains in graduation rates (Shapiro et al., 2017). Surprisingly, the same researchers who promoted these reforms now admit that most of them will not improve graduation rates:

Research suggests that the most popular reform models (including multiple measures assessment and placement, math pathways, and the co-requisite approach) will indeed improve students' rate of success in college-level math and English, but they are unlikely to substantially improve graduation rates. (Jaggars & Bickerstaff, 2018, p. 496)

The reform with the greatest impact has been corequisites. The model was based on an effective program but has largely been implemented as a laissez-faire method of putting at-risk students into college-level courses, even if they were completely unprepared, with as little support as 1 lab hour a week. The Community College of Baltimore County began a program called the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) in which students just beneath college-level placement volunteered to enroll in a college English course with double the time on task. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) studied the model and their research showed that it increased pass rates in first-year college-level courses, though they were not sure whether it was due to the model or that students volunteered to be in the program (Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012).

The benefits of the ALP corequisite model have been widely reported, and the model does appear to correlate with an improvement in gatekeeper pass rates and subsequent retention over stand-alone remediation when properly implemented. However, long-term effects show no gains in graduation, and the cost of the model studied is double that of traditional remediation. Moreover, the Institute for Education Science's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an organization that highlights quality research for practitioners, excluded

the CCRC research on ALP (Bailey et al., 2016), noting it did not meet WWC standards.

However, interest groups pounced on the idea of corequisites and began selling it as “the” solution to the alleged “problem of remediation.” With the CCRC’s and the media’s assistance (Lu, 2013), groups like Complete College America (CCA) demonized remediation (Complete College America, 2012), stating that corequisites were the antidote to such notions as “remediation is engineered for failure” (p. 2) and is “robbing students of precious time, money, and motivation” (p. 11), both of which can be contextualized and debunked (Goudas & Boylan, 2012). According to the CCA’s inflammatory rhetoric, remediation is a bridge to nowhere.

Once CCA labeled prerequisite remediation as the enemy of college completion, they then introduced variations of corequisites as the answer. They partnered with well-funded interest groups such as Lumina, Gates, Dell, and Carnegie and pushed for the removal of remediation completely. This is in spite of the fact that the CCRC—the research organization that interest groups cite most frequently when they use data to support corequisites—is on record as stating:

We do not advocate—nor do we believe that the results of our research support—the elimination or reduction of developmental education, the placing of all students into college courses, or the wholesale conversion of developmental education into a co-requisite model. (Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott Clayton, 2013, p. 2)

More importantly, a recent study contradicts the argument that remediation is a barrier. A National Center for Education Statistics study shows that underprepared students who complete their remedial courses graduate at a higher rate than nonremedial students, 43% compared to 39% (Chen, 2016, p. 35). And half of all remedial students in the large sample completed all their remedial courses. This research has been ignored by virtually all interest groups. It turns out that when students complete their prerequisite remedial courses—again, 49% do so (p. v)—these students perform better than nonremedial students in the most important metric: completion.

After being baited with a corequisite model supported with data, institutions instead implemented hasty, cheap, and unstudied versions of corequisites not resembling the original design. For example, the entire Oklahoma State System of Higher Education (2016) mandated versions of corequisites, but their options allow institutions to require at-risk students to take college-level courses with as little as 1 hour of extra tutoring a week. Any educator knows that putting at-risk students in college-level courses with only 1 hour in a tutor center as support is equivalent to allowing many of them to fail. The state systems in Georgia, California, Texas, and Tennessee are following suit by eliminating most or all prerequisite remedial courses, mandating unresearched corequisite versions in their place, and putting almost all underprepared students into college-level courses with or without proper support (Scott-Clayton, 2018).

The elimination of remediation is happening in other states, with some not even offering any support for at-risk students. As a response to the assault

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on remediation, Florida's legislators made remediation optional in beginning in fall of 2014 (Smith, 2015). Unsurprisingly, recent research shows that at-risk students perform much worse in college-level math and English when they are allowed to bypass the remedial courses they place into (Pain, 2016).

Another important bait and switch occurred when the CCRC and other groups concluded that college placement tests such as Compass® and Accuplacer® are not accurate (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014). Their study initially proposed combining multiple measures for more accurate placement, certainly a reasonable and important finding. They consequently advocated for the use of multiple measures in assessment. When the CCRC found that this reduced African American student placement into college-level courses by half (Scott-Clayton & Stacey, 2015), they switched their recommendation to lowering the bar for entrance to college-level courses down to a high school GPA of 2.7 (Belfield, 2015). They now recommend that institutions use any one of six or more individual metrics to get into college-level courses (Barnett & Reddy, 2017). This model, originally based on peer-reviewed and published data, would now place almost all students into college-level courses automatically, something that has not been researched.

Guided pathways is the latest bait and switch in higher education. CCRC researchers wrote a book (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) on a holistic reform designed to improve graduation rates at two-year colleges. The design is elegant in theory and is based on sound research. Many institutions have been implementing guided pathways because of this grounding. However, the switch occurs when institutions choose to implement only parts of the holistic design, resulting in piecemeal implementation instead of the research-based full implementation model. Researchers and policy makers rarely discourage this random and fragmentary movement toward comprehensive implementation. Therefore, the switch unfortunately allows administrators to pick and choose the easiest and cheapest parts of guided pathways, and ignore the expensive and complicated parts, such as hiring and training more advisers, reducing fully online education, increasing full-time faculty, and reducing student-teacher ratios.

This bait and switch must stop. Although much of the research supporting reforms of remediation is sound and conducted in good faith, a great deal of campus-level implementation is neither. Piecemeal implementation does not represent the proper application of research. Think about it: If a medical trial conducted a treatment on patients for 15 weeks and reported positive results, and then other doctors chose to implement this same treatment for 5 weeks, but cited evidence from the 15-week study as proof that the 5-week treatment would work, consumers would consider those doctors unfit. The same should go for postsecondary research. Remarkably, many of the postsecondary education scholars who have completed studies are encouraging institutions to implement versions of reforms that do not resemble the models and findings in their original research.

The only holistic reform which has been proven to work and which used the gold standard of scientific research—randomized controlled trials—is the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) from the City University of New York (2016). ASAP is a well-supported holistic reform that doubled graduation rates for remedial and college-level students, and it even includes prerequisite remedial courses for those who need them. Fortunately, it is being replicated in several colleges (Sommo & Ratledge, 2015) almost exactly as it was designed and studied. It works, it does not eliminate remedial courses when they might be helpful, and it does not reduce access or opportunity for those students who are most at-risk.

Sadly, many current postsecondary reforms—corequisites, multiple measures, math pathways, and guided pathways, among others—are not being implemented by replicating the research they are based on. It is essential to apply more rigorous standards when implementing reforms in postsecondary education by ensuring those reforms are based on sound research and are implemented with fidelity to related research. Researchers, the media, interest groups, and colleges all have a responsibility in this process.

The net effect on student performance is what truly matters for any reform. Thus far the completion agenda's reform movement has done little to improve outcomes. In fact, we have moved in the opposite direction by implementing reforms on a piecemeal basis and in ways not supported by existing research. In the process, the net effect is that we have reduced at-risk students' access and opportunity while claiming to have reformed remediation successfully (Scott-Clayton, 2018). We have yet to actually improve completion rates, and our weakest and poorest students continue to languish in improperly designed and weakly supported piecemeal programs. Holistic, long-term, and well-funded support systems are the most effective way forward in achieving the postsecondary completion agenda. Let's choose to commit our resources accordingly and avoid switching good data into easy, cheap, and fast.

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