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At 2-Year Colleges, Students Eager but Unready

By [DIANA JEAN SCHEMO](#)

DUNDALK, Md. — At first, Michael Walton, starting at community college here, was sure that there was some mistake. Having done so well in high school in West Virginia that he graduated a year and a half early, how could he need remedial math?

Eighteen and temperamental, Mickey, as everyone calls him, hounded the dean, insisting that she take another look at his placement exam. The dean stood firm. Mr. Walton's anger grew. He took the exam a second time. Same result.

"I flipped out big time," Mr. Walton said.

Because he had no trouble balancing his checkbook, he took himself for a math wiz. But he could barely remember the Pythagorean theorem and had trouble applying sine, cosine and tangent to figure out angles on the geometry questions.

Mr. Walton is not unusual. As the new school year begins, the nation's 1,200 community colleges are being deluged with hundreds of thousands of students unprepared for college-level work.

Though higher education is now a near-universal aspiration, researchers suggest that close to half the students who enter college need remedial courses.

The shortfalls persist despite high-profile efforts by public universities to crack down on ill-prepared students.

Since the [City University of New York](#), the largest urban public university, barred students who need remediation from attending its four-year colleges in 1999, others have followed with similar steps.

California State set an ambitious goal to cut the proportion of unprepared freshmen to 10 percent by 2007, largely by testing them as high school juniors and having them make up for deficiencies in the 12th grade.

Cal State appears nowhere close to its goal. In reading alone, nearly half the high school juniors appear unprepared for college-level work.

Aside from New York City's higher education system, at least 12 states explicitly bar state universities from providing remedial courses or take other steps like deferred admissions to steer students needing helping toward technical or community colleges.

Some students who need to catch up attend two- and four-year institutions simultaneously.

The efforts, educators say, have not cut back on the thousands of students who lack basic skills. Instead, the colleges have clustered those students in community colleges, where their chances of succeeding are low and where taxpayers pay a second time to bring them up to college level.

The phenomenon has educators struggling with fundamental questions about access to education, standards and equal opportunity.

Michael W. Kirst, a Stanford professor who was a co-author of a report on the gap between aspirations and college

attainment, said that 73 percent of students entering community colleges hoped to earn four-year degrees, but that only 22 percent had done so after six years.

“You can get into school,” Professor Kirst said. “That’s not a problem. But you can’t succeed.”

Nearly half the 14.7 million undergraduates at two- and four-year institutions never receive degrees. The deficiencies turn up not just in math, science and engineering, areas in which a growing chorus warns of difficulties in the face of global competition, but also in the basics of reading and writing.

According to scores on the 2006 ACT college entrance exam, 21 percent of students applying to four-year institutions are ready for college-level work in all four areas tested, reading, writing, math and biology.

For many students, the outlook does not improve after college. The Pew Charitable Trusts recently found that three-quarters of community college graduates were not literate enough to handle everyday tasks like comparing viewpoints in newspaper editorials or calculating the cost of food items per ounce.

The unyielding statistics showcase a deep disconnection between what high school teachers think that their students need to know and what professors, even at two-year colleges, expect them to know.

At Cal State, the system admits only students with at least a B average in high school. Nevertheless, 37 percent of the incoming class last year needed remedial math, and 45 percent needed remedial English.

“Students are still shocked when they’re told they need developmental courses,” said Donna McKusik, the senior director of developmental, or remedial, education at the Community College of Baltimore County. “They think they graduated from a high school, they should be ready for college.”

Across the nation, federal and state education officials are pressing for a K-16 vision of education that runs from kindergarten through college graduation. Such an approach, they say, would help high schools better prepare students for college.

In Florida, Gov. [Jeb Bush](#) appointed a [Board of Regents](#) to oversee education at all public institutions, from elementary through bachelor’s programs. At Cal State, professors are advising 12th-grade teachers on preparing students to succeed in college.

Starting at a Deficit

As the debate rages, nearly half of all students seeking degrees begin their journeys at community colleges much like the Dundalk campus of the Community College of Baltimore County, two-story no-frills buildings named by letters, not benefactors or grateful alumni. The college’s interim vice chancellor for learning and developmental education, Alvin Starr, said he saw students who passed through high school never having read a book cover to cover.

“They’ve listened in class, taken notes and taken the test off of that,” Dr. Starr said.

Though remedial needs are high, Dr. Starr said, the courses offer something invaluable, the chance to overcome basic deficiencies in reading, writing or math.

“You have to figure the cost to society on the other side if you don’t educate these students,” he said.

Most of the students expect the transition to community college to be seamless. But the first, and sometimes last, stop for many are remedial math classes.

“It’s the math that’s killing us,” Dr. McKusik said.

The sheer numbers of enrollees like Mr. Walton who have to take make-up math is overwhelming, with 8,000 last year among the nearly 30,000 degree-seeking students systemwide. Not all those students come directly from high school. Many have taken off a few years and may have forgotten what they learned, Dr. McKusik said.

More than one in four remedial students work on elementary and middle school arithmetic. Math is where students often lose confidence and give up.

“It brings up a lot of emotional stuff for them,” Dr. McKusik said.

She told of 20 students who had just burst into tears on receiving their math entrance exam scores and walked out on college. Mr. Walton remembers a fellow student who failed to hand in a math assignment for the fourth time in the last week of class and learned that he would fail. The student lunged toward the professor and said, “I’ll kill you.”

“You can say whatever you want, but this really isn’t helping your grade,” the professor replied, Mr. Walton said.

The student stormed out the door with a final expletive, leaving the professor shaken.

Fear of Appearing Ignorant

The biggest challenge, professors say, is trying to engage students, to persuade them that ideas matter. Dr. McKusik suspects that behind the apathy is a fear of appearing ignorant.

“Everything in society is geared to celebrate, to value, the winner,” she said. “These are students who haven’t been at the top. They won’t show themselves as vulnerable at all.”

With most students having commitments to jobs and families, community colleges typically offer little in the way of a social life or school spirit. So they need to find ways to reach their less traditional audience.

“That’s why we’re trying to use pop culture in the classroom, to get their attention,” said Betsy Gooden, an English teacher who, in a remedial reading class one day last spring, tried to coax students to discuss a television documentary.

Two or three students in a class of 10 women carried most of the discussion, which seemed more like Ricky Lake than Lit 101, with students reacting to the film almost exclusively in terms of their personal experiences.

They covered love, sex and cheating boyfriends. Before the class was over, two women disclosed that they had been raped. About half the students said nothing at all.

Karen Olson, a history professor, and David Truscello, who teaches English, are trying another common strategy, mixing remedial work with other subjects. They are co-teachers of a course that combines African-American history with composition.

Professor Olson says teachers should stop making “unrealistic assignments” like chapters from “600-page textbooks” and should meet students at their level, raising abilities by degrees.

In her class, she assigns more manageable readings and carves up the load, so no student is responsible for doing it all.

“It’s not like they’re living four years in a dorm,” Professor Truscello said.

Most are working, sometimes at more than one job.

“That impinges on everything,” he added. “I have students who take two buses to come to school. It’s amazing that they do it.”

Solutions and Successes

Another part of the solution at community colleges is in Student Success Centers. They are actually tutoring centers. Dundalk’s is open 63 hours a week.

Along a wall is a rack of handouts explaining points of grammar that might have last been explicitly taught in middle school, a measure of the immense ground to be made up. One covers comparative adjectives, explaining “more” vs. “most” or “smarter” vs. “smartest.” Another discusses using pronouns and verb tenses.

At one table, Kirn Shahzadi, 20, once an A student at Parkville High School, was being tutored a few hours before her final in remedial algebra. In addition to math, Ms. Shahzadi needed remedial courses in reading and one in helping with basic skills like note taking, researching and organizing schedules. By the second week of that course, she said, half the students had dropped out.

Still, the school has winners who make it through and feel that they have to fit into the changing workplace.

Mr. Walton said careers like his father’s as a welder for a major construction company were now harder to find. His father rose to foreman, putting Mr. Walton’s older brother through [Johns Hopkins University](#).

Mr. Walton, who married soon after high school, put himself through the Baltimore community college working as a security guard at \$7.80 an hour. He has had shoplifters pull knives on him and spray him with Mace, he said.

His salary covered the utilities and phone bills, and left his wife, an administrative assistant at Johns Hopkins, to pay the mortgage. He added that at times he suspected that she had felt more like a caretaker than a wife, and he worried for their future.

“I know she’s sick and tired of taking care of me,” he said in May. “It’s rip-your-hair-out-at-night difficult.”

But Mr. Walton made it through that remedial math class four years ago, ultimately praising the dean for standing firm. In June, he crossed a stage to receive an associate’s degree in computer science. Next year, he plans to earn another degree in, of all things, math.

He said he would like to earn a full bachelor’s, but hesitates.

“I’m scared to death of going to college,” he said. “I’ll be up to my eyeballs in debt.”

This summer he sent his résumé even to employers demanding bachelor’s degrees and several years’ experience, hoping that his enthusiasm would compensate where credentials fell short. He sought positions that included tuition breaks for employees.

His strategy paid off with two offers, one in data entry at the community college here, a job he held on work study before graduating, and another as a technician repairing copying machines. Mr. Walton went for the second.

It offers benefits, tuition reimbursement and a salary of \$22,850 a year, with extra money toward buying a new car every few years.

“I feel a little bit more — I don’t want to say confident — but maybe worthy,” Mr. Walton said. “Now, I feel like I’m all that, and a bag of chips.”

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