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# The New California System of Remediation of College Students

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**T**he higher education news is full of stories about New York's latest decision to phase-out remedial education at 9 of the 11 City University of New York (CUNY System) campuses. Remedial education will be the responsibility of the already overworked New York State community college system.

Although this decision is being heralded as drastic it apparently has escaped many that California has already adopted a similar plan. California has a somewhat unique system of postsecondary institutions. Basically there are three layers of institutions each with a different mission and culture. At the top of the hierarchy of prestige is the University of California system (UC). On average, the ten UC campuses accept only the best-prepared students - those that graduated in the upper 12% of their high school classes. Next in line is the California State System (CSU). These 23 campuses are the middle-ground -- typically open to those who graduate in the upper half of their high school class. At the bottom of the heap come the 107 community colleges with their open admission policies. In total, the California system follows what Burton Clark labeled as the "Master Plan." Although not an official part of the Master Plan, most students who transfer from the community colleges enter the California State System.

The level of required remediation (i.e., the teaching of content and skills expected to be learned in high school) has been increasing drastically at all levels especially at the California State University System campuses. Certainly, being in the upper half of a high school graduating class does not guarantee students will be performing college-level work. Remedial courses present special problems. First, there is the question of college credit. Do courses containing content pitched at a pre-college audience deserve college credit? Secondly, many students must repeat remedial courses because they cannot or do not grasp the content on their first try. Here the question is how to incorporate the repeated classes in the calculation of grade point averages and how many chances should a student receive?. In addition, there is the problem of funding. Is it fair for the taxpayers to subsidize the education of students in remedial coursework? After all, the students were initially subsidized during their high school (and elementary) years when the content was supposedly first presented (assuming the student was enrolled in a public school). Now, the taxpayers are asked to subsidize the students AGAIN because the first (or second, or third) attempt did not hit fertile ground. Yet another problem is staffing. Many college teachers are less than enthusiastic to teach remedial courses. Subsequently, a substantial number of courses are staffed by adjuncts or instructors with minimal experience. The picture therefore develops: the students needing the most help are being taught by the most inexperienced (new) and/or the most under-supported (adjunct) professors. All of these problems equaled a need for policy examination and change.

Last year the California State University System changed its policy. Students are now given one year to either "catch-up" or "get-out." In other words, remedial courses are still available but are now rationed and available to a student only for a one-year period. If the student can be "remediated" in the one-year span, he or she is then allowed to continue to take courses toward the degree. If, however, the one-year window proves to be too narrow, the student must leave. Students are then directed to go to the community colleges to continue the remediation process. Once at college level, students may return to the California State University. This year 44 students had to leave.

Is this a good policy to handle remediation? From the view of the four-year colleges, I think it is. Certainly remediation was never meant to be an on-going activity and students with the threat of

expulsion appear to be motivated to advance to the college-level. In addition, it is positive for the California State System professors who are not propelled into teaching more and more sub-college courses.

My concern arises for the reputation and the culture of the community colleges. Community colleges are asked to do a great number of things; provide vocational training, provide transfer level college courses, interact with the community, provide adult education, just to name a few. In addition, the state of California is predicting a massive increase in the number of community college students within the next few years. Labeled "Tidal Wave II" it is anticipated that more than a half-million additional students will be knocking at the doors of the community colleges with expectations of service. The new ruling of "remediation at the community college" threatens to add even more strain to the already bulging walls of most of these campuses. Further, I am concerned that tossing the failures of the CSU system at the doorstep of the community colleges does harm to the culture and reputation of an institution already at the bottom of the prestige pyramid. Being a professor in a private research university I am very aware of postsecondary snobbery. Community college students (and hence teachers and administrators) are seen as less able than their counterparts at four-year schools. To add the burden of remediation only extends the image. Moreover, increasing the number of remedial students may create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many articles and books have claimed that community colleges squash dreams. Authors contend that students enter the community college hoping for a bachelor's degree yet never achieving one. Many students drop out during their community college years, others transfer to vocational type training. Although some students transfer to four-year institutions and do very well, the majority do not. What will adding more remedial students do for the reputation of the state's community colleges? Certainly it can only add more students with more obstacles to the transfer process. Again, the community colleges will be the scapegoat.

I have no answers, just suggestions. First, we need to invert (or at least equalize) the funding pyramid. Now, the funding equation in California provides the very least for community college students and the highest proportions of funding to students at the University of California system. Secondly, we need to re-think success and add more gauges than just the transfer to a four-year institution. Success should include factors such as enrolling students from diverse backgrounds, or assisting the unemployed to train for gainful employment. Finally, we need to cooperate. The three segments of higher education in the state do not work together in a sufficient manner. The "them versus us" mentality should melt into a "we" that would encourage partnerships, seamless course-taking patterns, and shared successes (and failures).

Remediation is a hot topic now. Other states are watching New York and California very closely and will likely pattern their own programs in similar veins. I urge my state to re-examine the structure that alienates its students into three neat and separate boxes (UC, CSU, CC) rather than merging them into a single entity: an educated populace.