The Impact of postsecondary remediation on African American students: A Review of research.

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The Role of Postsecondary Remediation for African American Students: A Review of Research

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The role of remediation in higher education has generated much debate over the last two decades. While states have enacted policies that reduced or eliminated postsecondary remediation, many policy actors and analysts have not completely acknowledged the ways in which remediation affects college access and success for African American students. This review of research first explains why African American students are disproportionately underprepared for college-level work. Then, the authors summarize the debates concerning the role of remediation in higher education, synthesize the research on the effectiveness of postsecondary remediation, and discuss major and recent policy enactments. They draw implications for the ways in which postsecondary remediation affects African American students and offer recommendations for future research and policy.

Keywords: higher education, remediation, African American students, academic success

Since the late 1990s, the role of postsecondary remediation has become a great concern to state policymakers, education policy analysts, institutional researchers, college faculty, and administrators (Bettinger & Long, 2007; Mazzeo, 2002; Soliday, 2002). While some research on the effectiveness of postsecondary remediation has produced mixed findings (Calcagno & Long, 2008), most studies suggest that remedial programs increase the likelihood of successful college-level course completion and persistence to degree attainment (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bahr, 2007, 2008a; Bettinger & Long, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009; Boylan, Bonham, & Tafari, 2005; Kreysa, 2007). Despite the evidence that illustrates remedial programs have a positive impact on college access and student success, policymakers and analysts remain concerned about the duplication of costs and tax dollars spent on remedial needs (Terry, 2007), negative public perceptions (Presley, 2008), delayed time to degree completion (Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008), and potential decrease in university rankings (Richardson, 2005).

State policymakers and college leaders have been particularly concerned about the extent to which colleges and universities can maintain academic quality and achieve institutional equity (Perin, 2006). More specifically, given that underrepresented students rely disproportionately on postsecondary remediation as a means to gain access to four-year colleges and universities, state and institutional officials remain perplexed about ways to increase academic rigor while providing opportunities for underrepresented students to access these institutions. Therefore, the policy debate concerning postsecondary remediation amounts to whether states and state higher education systems should maintain, revise, reduce, or eliminate remediation from public college and university settings. Given that 22 states or state higher education systems have already reduced or eliminated remediation from four-year colleges (Parker, 2007), this dispute has been a contentious policy issue in recent years.

African American students are most likely to rely on postsecondary remediation as a means for gaining access to higher education (Attewell et al., 2006). In fact, African American students are nearly twice as likely as White students to be found in remedial programs (Attewell et al., 2006). Therefore, if quality and equity are equally important policy matters, state and institutional leaders not only need to consider ways to maintain a strong curriculum and respectable standards, but also understand how postsecondary remediation affects access to and success in four-year...
Africans in Education

Landmark Supreme Court cases (e.g., Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954) and key pieces of legislation (e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, Higher Education Act of 1965) have allowed African Americans to make significant gains in education. Although more recent policies aimed at increasing access to higher education have not been targeted at African Americans in particular, the percentage of Blacks in higher education has grown over time. In fact, data from the American Council on Education’s (2009) Minorities in Higher Education status report indicated that college enrollment for African Americans increased by 46% between 1996 and 2006.

While college access for African Americans has steadily increased over the years, so has the need for postsecondary remediation (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). The historical context under which African Americans have been (mis)educated has generated persistent achievement gaps between their White and Asian American counterparts (Jackson, 2007). In urban, predominantly Black school settings, contemporary problems include: weak college preparatory curriculums, low Advanced Placement exam passing rates, ineffective and insufficient guidance counselor services, unqualified teachers, minimal and archaic school materials, and inadequate school facilities (Kozol, 2005). These complex issues exist in many school systems across the country, especially in underfunded and poorly structured urban school districts that serve large numbers of African American students (Condron & Roscigno, 2003).

Another problem that affects educational progress for African American students is racial discrimination (Jackson, 2007). Evidence indicates that institutional or systemic racism is embedded in many public policies, which negatively affect the educational outcomes of African American students (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Some of the institutional structures within schools that impede college access for African American students are nationally consistent. For example, it is well-known that African American students typically do not perform well on standardized tests when compared to their White counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Steele (1997) concluded the discrepancy in standardized test scores between African American and White students may be caused by “stereotype threat,” which is anxiety that arises when individuals are placed at risk of affirming a negative stereotype about their identity group. Despite the differences in test performance between African American and White students, colleges and universities continually employ such measures to determine college admission even though research suggests that standardized tests are weak measures of academic success for students of color (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005).

Furthermore, school psychologists attribute the most influential factors related to the disproportionate number of underperforming African American students to a lack of parental involvement, failures of regular and special education systems, and pressures from parents and teachers (Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005). Still, others have found negative teacher perceptions and
low expectations of African American students as contributing factors to the low levels of achievement (Osburne, 2001).

Therefore, it appears that the compilation of problems that many African American students in urban schools face may be attributed to poor educational environments and culturally irrelevant public policy. Jones (2002) summarized the cause of these issues:

Many current school reform policies are causing achievement gaps to widen rather than close. These policies are focusing primarily on high standards and assessment while neglecting issues of access to high-quality education taught by competent and caring teachers who hold high expectations for currently underachieving students. (p. ix)

The impact of these policies, as described by Jones, cripples the opportunity for African American students to enroll and become successful in higher education. Outcomes of poor educational experiences lead to social and economic fallbacks that adversely affect individual communities and the society at large (Kozol, 2005).

One of the most important components of African American students’ experiences and outcomes in education involves their achievement levels in mathematics, science, reading, and writing—four critical subjects areas in which students must succeed to become adequately prepared for college-level work. However, the aggregate of African American students continually perform worse than their White and Asian counterparts in mathematics, science, and reading. Even after controlling for socioeconomic differences, these achievement gaps exist between African American students and their peers (Attewell et al, 2006).

Ternstrom and Ternstrom (2003) found that African American students are more likely than all other racial and ethnic groups to score “below basic” in reading, mathematics, and science on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Lewis and his colleagues (2008) analyzed NAEP data and found that African American students in urban school settings achieve well below the national average. At the fourth-grade level, Lewis and associates found that more than 60% of African American students scored “below basic” in reading and only 12% of African Americans pupils were proficient in math. At the eighth-grade level, Lewis and others found that eight percent of African American students scored “below basic” in math—four percentage points lower than all fourth grade students in 2005. Furthermore, 89% of African American eighth graders were found not proficient in reading across the 11 urban school districts studied, which was particularly worrisome given the national average for “at proficient” eighth grade students was 26%. These pronounced and persistent achievement gaps begin as early as kindergarten and persist through students’ senior year in high school (Bahr, 2010). This outcome can be attributed, in part, to the environmental and systemic issues that undercut academic preparation described earlier in this section. Consequently, given that colleges and universities largely—and in many cases solely—adopt standardized placement exams to assess students’ academic prowess, African American students disproportionately rely on college remediation as a means to access postsecondary education.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF REMEDIATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Postsecondary remediation—often interchangeably termed development education—involves colleges and universities admitting students who they believe have the ability to complete a degree with some developmental assistance. Remediation is designed to enhance academic deficiencies among America’s underprepared college students through academic support, with program components ranging from a single course offering to more comprehensive academic and social support services, such as tutorial support, counseling, and study skill seminars (Attewell et al., 2006; Boylan & Bonham, 2007).

A large number of Americans leave high school underprepared for college-level work. In fact, research suggests that roughly 30% of all undergraduates enroll in remedial courses at four-year colleges (Attewell et al., 2006; Strong American Schools, 2008). Greene and Foster (2003) found that about 68% of all American students and 80% of African American students leave high school
‘minimally’ underprepared. Other research has noted that African American students are nearly twice as likely as White students to be found in remedial programs (Attewell et al., 2006). Since a disproportionate number of African American students complete high school underprepared for college-level work, the elimination of remediation affects access to higher education for a larger proportion of African American students than it does White students (Bettinger & Long, 2007).

Postsecondary remediation policy is often enacted by states or state higher education systems and implemented by institutions. Therefore, states and state higher education systems often set the policies that govern where, how, and who pays for remediation at public institutions (Bettinger & Long, 2007). Despite the important role states play in determining remediation policy, state legislators appear to be unclear about what remedial education is, whom it serves, how much it costs, and who should provide it (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). A survey on whether colleges and universities should give remedial education more attention revealed that 32% of legislators were in agreement, 34% were in disagreement, and 32% remained neutral (Breneman & Merisotis, 2002).

States and higher education systems are raising policy questions that threaten to reduce, eliminate, or shift the costs of remediation to other systems or individuals, including the students (Bettinger & Long, 2007). These threats have been most pronounced at public four-year colleges (Parker, 2007). In fact, Parker noted that roughly 22 states or higher education systems have either reduced or eliminated postsecondary remediation.

The debate over whether state higher education systems should provide remedial education is rooted in conflicting ideologies related to equity and excellence (Perin, 2006). On the one hand, the evolving need for colleges and universities to become more selective has placed pressures on state and institutional leaders to raise admissions standards. As such, many state legislators and college administrators have increased standardized requirements such as grade point average (GPA) and scholastic assessment test (SAT) scores to improve their placement in university ranking systems (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007; Richardson, 2005). On the other hand, the mission and goals of many colleges and universities to increase opportunity and equity for underprepared and underrepresented students, many of whom are low-income, African American, and Hispanic (Bettinger & Long, 2007). The intersection between these two demands has placed postsecondary remediation center stage of the most controversial and contested higher education policy debates in the 21st century (Bahr, 2007, 2008a).

**DEBATES ON POSTSECONDARY REMEDIATION**

Discussions concerning whether American higher education should offer remediation dates back to the 19th century when Harvard and Yale expressed differing views on the inclusion of developmental assistance (Breneman & Haarlow, 1998). More specifically, in 1828, the Yale Report called for an end to admitting students with “defective preparation” (Brier, 1984, p. 2). Meanwhile, former Harvard University President Charles W. Eliot, in his 1869 inaugural address, took the opposing view by stating, “The American college is obliged to supplement the American school. Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply” (Spann, 2000, p. 2). In the 1870s, Harvard instituted the first freshman composition course to accommodate students’ academic deficiencies and the institutions academic expectations (Maxwell, 1997).

In the middle of the 18th century, land-grant colleges created academic departments for students with deficiencies in reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (Breneman & Haarlow, 1998), and by the 19th century, 40% of the 238,000 students enrolled in American higher education participated in remedial education (Ignash, 1997).

The influx of World War II veterans coupled with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Higher Education Act of 1965 sparked another surge of students who needed remedial assistance (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Between the 1960s and 1980s, thousands of underprepared students took advantage of open admissions policies (Breneman & Merisotis, 2002). The U. S. government believed that every person who was motivated and could benefit from higher
education should have the opportunity to attend (Callan, 2001). This federal commitment to expand educational opportunity for all Americans made college access a fundamental policy goal at the federal level. Due to this unprecedented commitment, colleges and universities had no choice but to offer remedial education to students who were ill-equipped for the academic rigors of college-level work.

The historical backdrop of remediation in higher education has been relevant in recent debates as states and state higher education systems struggle with policy alternatives of the role and relevancy of postsecondary remediation. Arguments for and against postsecondary remediation are very convincing and warrant careful attention because of the shared goals of academic quality and institutional equity.

**Arguments against Remediation**

Some opponents argue for the reduction or elimination of college remediation because they purport remediation diverts human and financial resources from other academic priorities (Phelan, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Terry, 2007). Critics also maintain that postsecondary remediation is not a prudent investment because students are taught skills in college that they should have acquired in high school (Terry, 2007). Others specify that a remedial education curriculum is not appropriate for four-year institutions and that the academic needs of unprepared students might be best served by community colleges (Phelan, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Furthermore, researchers question the effect of postsecondary remediation in preparing students to successfully negotiate the academic demands of college (Adelman, 2004; Attewell et al., 2006). Moreover, policy analysts assert there is a lack of documentation evaluating the efficacy of remedial education while others completely dismiss the efficacy of remedial education on promoting college success (Adelman, 2004; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Perhaps most importantly, critics feel that investing in remediation is not pragmatic because some studies indicate that students who participate in remedial education are less likely to graduate (Adelman, 2004; Bahr, 2007; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008).

Some policy analysts and institutional leaders who oppose postsecondary remediation have offered their personal views and values about the role and relevancy of postsecondary remediation. According to an expurgated record of comments, a former Queens College president asserted “[Garbage] in, [garbage] out . . . if you take in [garbage] and turn out [garbage] that is slightly more literate, you’re still left with [garbage]” (Marcus, 2000, p. 14). Similarly, Manno (1996) characterized postsecondary remediation as a “dumbed down” system and argued, “remediation sends the wrong message to students: ‘Don’t bother working hard. It doesn’t matter. We’ll admit you anyway’” (p. 80).

**Arguments for Remediation**

Supporters of remedial policies argue that eliminating postsecondary remediation has adverse implications for students of color (Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2008a, 2010). In a case study about remediation reform, Richardson (2005) argued that “Restrictive entry policies that intentionally or unintentionally bar the entry of African Americans and Hispanics from the nation’s colleges and universities appear not only discriminatory but also economically foolish” (p. 185). Similarly, proponents of remedial programs assert that attacks to dismantle developmental education in four-year public institutions are ultimately an effort to stymie access of postsecondary education for historically oppressed groups (Attewell et al., 2006). Attewell and colleagues also explained “. . . policies that prevent students who need remedial/developmental work from enrolling in four-year colleges could greatly reduce the likelihood that [students of color] would ever obtain bachelor’s degrees” (p. 887).

Other proponents of postsecondary remediation contend that shifting developmental education solely to community colleges further compounds their overwhelmed financial and human
resources, reduces educational opportunities for remedial students, and creates revenue problems for colleges grappling with enrollment losses (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Similarly, Parker (2007) argued there is insufficient data to assess the effectiveness of remedial programs in community colleges and designate two-year institutions as the best and only place for college students who need remediation. Research has supported this claim and found that students, especially African American and Latinos, in remedial education at community colleges tend to feel ostracized about their placement (Parker & Richardson, 2005), powerless about the future (Callahan & Chumney, 2009), and unclear about how to meet their academic goals (Deil-Amenn & Rosenbaum, 2002) compared to students’ experiences and the accumulation of resources in remedial programs at four-year colleges. Parker also posited that a large proportion of students who are denied access to four-year institutions will likely not transfer to such institutions once remedial coursework is complete, which is consistent with other research that suggests community college students are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than students who begin college at four-year institutions (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

Moreover, Parker (2007) argued that ending college remediation “. . . fail[s] to address the root causes of student underpreparation” (p. 3). She added, “By pointing the finger at the students, as opposed to addressing academic disparities between schools and colleges, higher education policymakers miss the target of reducing remediation” (p. 5). Kimbrough and Harper (2006) unequivocally explained that the dismantling of remedial programs has had negative implications for minority students. Specifically, they noted: “This policy shift has had negative effects on African American men . . . who previously relied upon developmental studies programs as a one-chance opportunity for admission to postsecondary institutions” (p. 192).

Finally, while a few studies (e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Terry, 2007) take issue with the cost of remediation, especially due to the current economic climate in the United States, many economists and policy analysts estimate that postsecondary remediation comprises a small portion of the total higher education budget and even enables states to obtain fiscal returns on their investment. Breneman (1998) pointed out that the total national expenditure of remedial education at public institutions is less than one percent each year. Breneman and Haarlow (1998) posited that if one-third of all students taking at least one remedial course were to earn a baccalaureate degree, they would generate more than $74 billion in federal tax revenue and $13 billion in state and local tax dollars, while only costing $1 billion to remediate. Spann (2000) indicated that the graduation rate for remedial students would have to drop below one percent before taxpayers would see a net loss on investment. Merisotis and Phipps (2000) noted that state funds would not be appropriated to more worthy initiatives if remediation were to be removed from all postsecondary institutions.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POSTSECONDARY REMEDIATION

In order to design policy that reduces postsecondary remediation, more research is needed to understand the effectiveness of postsecondary remediation on diverse students at both two- and four-year institutions (Parker, 2007). Researchers need to engage in empirical investigations that decipher what approaches in postsecondary remediation work, under what conditions and contexts, and for whom, to arrive at informed policy decisions. Unfortunately, as Merisotis and Phipps (2000) purported, “research about the effectiveness of remedial education programs has typically been sporadic, underfunded, and inconclusive” (p. 75).

Notwithstanding these discrepancies, there has been some empirical research conducted that examines the efficacy of postsecondary remediation on student outcomes. While some studies have produced mixed results (Calcagno & Long, 2008), other research on postsecondary remediation indicates that remedial programs increase the likelihood of successful completion of college-level coursework and facilitate persistence to degree attainment (Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2007, 2008a, 2010).
Positive Effects

Research has demonstrated about one-half of remedial students complete their degrees (Attewell et al., 2006), which is quite similar to national college completion rates (Seidman, 2005). In fact, many assessments of remedial programs over the years seem to show successful outcomes in remedial education, enabling underprepared students to successfully progress through the college curriculum and complete their degrees at the same rate of their peers (Bahr, 2008a).

These programs have been found to be particularly helpful for African American students, serving as a conduit through which many underrepresented students of color have accessed postsecondary education (Attewell et al., 2006; Bahr, 2010). Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88), Attewell and colleagues (2006) found that 61% of African American students enrolled in remedial courses and 50% completed their degrees. They concluded that “If those students were deemed unsuited for college and denied entry to four-year institutions, a large proportion of minority graduates in the high school class of 1992 would never have received degrees” (p. 915).

More recent studies confirm the effectiveness of remedial programs (Bahr, 2007, 2008a; Bettinger & Long, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009; Moss & Yeaton, 2006). Bettinger and Long (2007, 2009) used longitudinal information from college transcripts, college applications, and standardized tests to examine remediation in Ohio, the fifth largest public higher education system in the country. After controlling for the test scores and background characteristics of 28,000 students placed in remedial English and mathematics, Bettinger and Long (2007) found that students who enrolled in college remedial courses were more likely to transfer to a four-year institution and complete a bachelor’s degree. Bettinger and Long’s (2004) earlier research on postsecondary remediation at non-selective four-year colleges revealed findings that are consistent with their more recent work.

Little or No Adverse Effects

While most research on postsecondary remediation generally suggests such intervention increases access and success for underprepared students, some research has demonstrated that the remedial students who have the poorest skills are the least likely to complete the remedial course sequence and persist toward graduation (Bahr, 2007). The students who are most underprepared are overwhelmingly African American and ultimately accumulate a larger tuition bill due to their need to enroll and repeat remedial courses (Melguizo et al., 2008). Bahr (2010) concluded that racial disparities in postsecondary mathematics remediation are present between African American and White students because of the inequities experienced at the pre-college level. Therefore, Bahr argued that “… it is critically important that we identify points of intervention to increase both the overall success rate of students and the racial equity of remediation.”

Other studies have also found that postsecondary remediation has no or little impact on course completion and student persistence, especially for many African American students who require two or more remedial courses. For example, Bailey and associates (2008) found that only between 30%–40% of students who were referred to remediation at community colleges complete their remedial course sequence, and African American students who required two or more remedial courses were among those least likely to remediate successfully. Bailey and colleagues also observed that colleges tend to lose students early in the remedial course sequence. Therefore, early intervention and formative evaluation is necessary to understand reasons for students’ early withdrawal or failure.

One large scale study, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996), found that freshmen enrolled in remedial courses were less likely to persist in their second year compared to all other students. However, researchers (Bettinger & Long, 2007) have indicated that the NCES study failed to control for characteristics related to ability. Consequently, students with higher abilities who are adequately prepared for college are expected to persist at
higher rates. Failing to separate these differences make direct comparisons inaccurate (Bettinger & Long, 2007). Unfortunately, as discussed, several studies on postsecondary remediation have been methodologically weak (Bahr, 2008a). Therefore, more rigorous and sound research that examines the outcomes of postsecondary remediation is needed (Bahr, 2009). Notwithstanding such limitations, it appears that remedial programs generally lead to positive student outcomes unless students are ‘severely’ underprepared.

The students who do enter college severely underprepared ultimately accumulate higher tuition costs and spend more time in college (Melguizo et al., 2008). Melguizo and associates used descriptive and multivariate analyses to compare differences in financial costs and time delays for transfer students with different remediation needs across nine community colleges in Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, Melguizo and her colleagues found that students who were least prepared for college-level work—which were predominantly African American and Hispanic students—suffered most from excess money and time spent completing remedial course sequences. In particular, they found that students with the greatest academic need spent nearly $7,000 and five years enrolled at community colleges, compared to better prepared students who spent just over $4,000 and were enrolled for roughly two and one-half years. This disparity may be attributed to a lack of social and academic support, poor academic advising, and K-16 misalignment (Bahr, 2008b, 2010). Therefore, the best ways to decrease financial costs and time for students may be to increase the allocation resources and improve the alignment between school systems and levels of education within and across states.

To summarize, the most prudent investment in postsecondary remediation occurs when students complete their remedial course sequence successfully and persist to graduation. Bahr (2010) found that, among students who require postsecondary remediation, regardless of their academic deficiencies, are just as likely to complete their degrees as students who never relied on developmental assistance. Therefore, identifying promising practices in postsecondary remediation would benefit students and institutions. Unfortunately, the paucity of rigorous research has not identified the most promising practices on ways policies, practices and pedagogy can best shape student success in postsecondary remediation. Therefore, many states and state higher education systems have enacted policies to reduce or eliminate postsecondary remediation without sufficient evidence or effort to improve remedial programs.

**Postsecondary Remediation Policy Enactments**

The most notable policy enactment concerning remedial education at four-year colleges involved the state of New York. In the late-1990s, as one of the nation’s largest and most diverse university systems, the City University of New York (CUNY) case became one of the most controversial decisions to phase out remedial education in the history of American higher education (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001). Prior to political controversy, CUNY operated as an open admissions institution—a policy that valued remedial assistance for local inner-city students (Richardson, 2005). In 1970, Robert E. Marshak, City College President, purported “the guiding principle [of open admissions] was to be that although CUNY could not guarantee that all students with deficiencies would overcome their handicaps, each student would be given a chance to prove himself [or herself]” (Marshak, 1982, p. 48). Richardson (2005) noted that, during this time, CUNY’s mission was “To meet the specialized needs of the urban constituency and provide access to the diverse New York City community” (p. 177).

In 1998, the lead policy actor driving the debate to abolish remediation was New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani who called for an end to open admissions at CUNY (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001). During the CUNY controversy, Mayor Giuliani asserted that the “University system currently devotes far too much money and effort to teaching skills that students should have learned in high school” (Schmidt, 1998, p. A33). Perhaps most significant in the CUNY case was the racial divide in the policy process. According to Marcus (2000), all of the African American and Hispanic Regents of CUNY voted against the plan, understanding the implications
this shift would have on students of color. Notwithstanding, the CUNY board approved the plan in June 1998 and, soon thereafter, CUNY began eliminating remedial courses from all of its 11 four-year institutions (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001).

A fundamental problem with the latter CUNY policy decision involves the transfer requirements. More specifically, if students, who are admitted to CUNY, fail one placement test, they will be redirected to a CUNY community college to enroll in remedial courses. De-admitting students from a four-year school and asking them to begin their academic career at a two-year school in which they had no desire to attend significantly decreases the likelihood of baccalaureate degree completion (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002). Furthermore, even if students pass the developmental course at one of CUNY’s two-year colleges, they are eligible for readmission only if they pass another placement test (Marcus, 2000).

The long-term implications of this policy are of particular concern for students of color because CUNY has been the country’s leading producer of African American and Hispanic engineers (Richardson, 2005). Richardson (2005) conducted a case study of the shift in CUNY’s remedial policy and posited that African American student enrollment at CUNY’s four-year colleges will likely decline over time. Parker and Richardson (2005) collected 2003 CUNY enrollment data and found that 2,568 African American and Latino students who originally were admitted to CUNY’s four-year colleges were ultimately forced to begin at a CUNY two-year college. More recent data illustrate there has been a slight, yet persistent decline in the number of African American first-time freshmen enrolling in CUNY’s four-year colleges over the last decade (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Indian/Native American</th>
<th>Asian Americans/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
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<td>0.1</td>
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<td>25.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>17.4</td>
<td>25.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<td>25.5</td>
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Other states, such as Massachusetts and Indiana, have also adopted college admissions policies to increase academic standards without enacting a policy that comprehensively addresses academic underpreparation among students who require developmental assistance. In 1996, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education raised its admission standards to increase the academic quality in the state at four-year colleges, and simply placed a cap of “one” on developmental courses to be taken at institutions in the state (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2002). More recently, in 2007, the Indiana General Assembly enacted “Core 40” as a requirement for high school graduation unless parents sign an “opt-out” provision for their child. The Core 40 is set to become a college admissions requirement in Indiana in the fall of 2011 and requires completion of a “rigorous” high school curriculum. As an incentive, the policy offers free tuition and fees to those who meet certain financial aid and grade requirements. Students who do not complete the Core 40 or equivalent coursework will be denied access to Indiana’s four-year colleges (For more information, visit http://www.doe.in.gov/core40/overview.html). While Indiana’s efforts to increase college preparation and offer powerful incentives should be applauded, without addressing the problems that exist in many urban schools, such a policy will likely restrict access to higher education for many African American students. In other words, Indiana’s plan to aid underprepared and underrepresented students does not mirror their efforts underway to increase academic quality.

Although the Florida state legislature does not permit remedial instruction at four-year state colleges and universities (unless contracted through community colleges), the state adopted a bill in 2008 that ensured greater collaboration between secondary and postsecondary education systems to reduce the need for postsecondary remediation (Strong American Schools, 2008). The bill requires high schools to administer a college readiness assessment prior to grade 12 to identify academic deficiencies before high school graduation. Students who score below the cut-off will have the opportunity to enroll in remedial courses that apply to high school graduation requirements, be excused from taking the state exit exam, and become exempt from remedial instruction at the college-level. The bill requires community colleges to supply high school teachers with the types of curriculum used in remedial courses at the two-year college level to ensure greater alignment between secondary and postsecondary education. Florida’s policy efforts reflect the initial steps necessary to reduce the need for postsecondary remediation for all students. However, most states are behind in such initial efforts, and have adopted an approach that is far “too simplistic” for a “multifaceted problem” (Parker, 2007).

IMPLICATIONS

This article reviewed research to understand the impact of postsecondary remediation on college access and success for African American students. The review of the literature suggested academic underpreparedness among African American students originates early in their school experience, and is often the consequence of poorly funded schools and ineffective school officials. In other words, many African American students are adversely affected by the conditions under which they learn and develop as children in elementary and secondary schools, especially those from low-income, urban school districts. These conditions include insufficient materials, unqualified teachers, poor facilities, low expectations, weak college preparatory curricula, stereotype threat, and systemic racism (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Such conditions, in turn, prohibit a disproportionate number of African American students from gaining access to higher education and persisting through college-level coursework to postsecondary degree attainment (Jackson, 2007).

Postsecondary remediation has served as a means of intervention to resolve academic deficiencies since the 1800s. During the middle of the 1900s, federal policies expanded access to higher education and accommodated thousands of academically underprepared students (Breneman & Merisotis, 2002). However, over the past two decades, many states and state higher
education institutions tightened academic standards and reduced or eliminated remediation from four-year colleges (Parker, 2007), generating much debate in recent years. The controversy has also inspired education policy researchers to study the impact of postsecondary remediation. However, many studies have not fully acknowledged the ways in which remediation affects college access and success for African American students. Therefore, these authors parsed out the ways in which the debates, policy enactments, and empirical evidence related to postsecondary remediation has had an impact on Africans American students.

The review of research suggests that the growing body of empirical research on postsecondary remediation has produced mixed findings. For example, some studies indicate that African American students are most likely to require two or more postsecondary remedial courses and, consequently, least likely to remediate successfully (Bahr, 2010; Bailey et al., 2008). These students, who are most underprepared, incur the highest costs for tuition and fees and time spent in college (Melguizo et al., 2008). However, while there are a few studies that suggest postsecondary remediation has little or no impact, most of the research indicates that remedial programs increase the likelihood of successful college-level course completion and persistence to degree attainment.

In terms of costs of postsecondary remediation to states and institutions, there is substantial variation across states. Notwithstanding across-state differences, many policy analysts and economists agree that postsecondary remediation comprises a relatively small portion of the total higher education budget. Lastly, this review suggests that some state policy enactments may be widening equity gaps, especially for African American students. More specifically, by simply increasing academic standards, while failing to address the root causes of academic underpreparation, only restricts access to higher education for the growing population of underrepresented students with college-going aspirations.

**DISCUSSION**

Policymakers and college leaders face tough choices pertaining to equity and excellence in higher education. Postsecondary remediation policy has been a critical element of such choices, and has left many policymakers unsure about how to address students’ academic deficiencies (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Even during an era of fiscal turmoil, postsecondary remediation seems to be a prudent investment for higher education leaders and policymakers to preserve college access and success for African American students who require one or two remedial courses without substantially compromising academic standards at four-year institutions.

However, a few studies suggest that postsecondary remediation may not be the best alternative for African American and other underrepresented students who require two or more remedial courses. In particular, some studies indicate that postsecondary remediation has little or no effect on students’ successful completion a remedial course sequence. As such, policy alternatives become more complex for policymakers, and ways to increase or maintain academic quality and institutional equity become more difficult for college leaders. While many policymakers have, in the past, simply eliminated or reduced postsecondary remediation from four-year institutions—making the process of educating students who require developmental assistance the sole responsibility of community colleges—research has indicated that two-year institutions have not proven to be the best choice to increase baccalaureate degree recipients (Parker, 2007). More specifically, students who initially enroll in postsecondary education at two-year colleges with the intention to transfer are significantly less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree when compared to their peers who begin at four-year colleges (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Therefore, removing remediation from four-year colleges delimits access and opportunity for students who require just one or two remedial courses to transfer and persist towards earning a baccalaureate degree.
RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several policy alternatives that states and state higher education systems can adopt that will systematically reduce, but not eliminate, the need for postsecondary remediation. First, states and state higher education systems should make a consistent and coordinated effort to research and evaluate the impact of postsecondary remediation at representative colleges and universities before eliminating or reducing it from four-year institutions. Second, states and school districts should invest in the most effective early intervention programs to address academic deficiencies immediately after students are diagnosed as being “below basic” levels of achievement. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, states should implement policies that create additional funding, support quality teaching, and prepare more African American students for postsecondary education. Each recommendation follows as discussed in greater depth.

Research

While a small body of research has documented the effects of postsecondary remediation on African American students, additional research is needed to provide a more developed understanding of the impact of postsecondary remediation. There is currently a paucity of rigorous research that examines the conditions under which underrepresented and underprepared students best learn and persist with regard to remedial courses and programs. Due to the fact that most empirical evidence suggests postsecondary remediation positively influences academic success of underprepared students, states and state higher education systems should focus on identifying promising practices in postsecondary remedial education pedagogy and support services.

More rigorous research is also needed to understand the differences in remedial instruction and services provided at two- and four-year institutions. Knowing that African American students who begin higher education at two-year colleges are significantly less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree program when compared to their peers who begin at a four-year institution, a shift of all remedial responsibility to community colleges is unwise. Since most of the empirical studies have examined postsecondary remediation at community colleges, studies that draw comparisons between and within institutional types would help inform policymakers of the best institutional environments for service.

Education policy researchers also need to continually evaluate the impact of state policy enactments on educational equity and excellence. Since research on postsecondary remedial outcomes is sparse, many states and state higher education systems have made critical policy decisions based on little empirical data. Although many policy enactments have already moved to the implementation phase, it is important to still assess the impact of these policy efforts on students’ experiences and outcomes.

Furthermore, additional research that disaggregates students’ postsecondary remedial experiences and outcomes by demographic characteristics, such as race, income, and gender, are needed to develop a greater understanding of the ways in which postsecondary remediation influences different types of students. Such research would better inform policymakers about how access and equity are affected when certain policy choices are made. Research that disaggregates findings by demographic characteristics should also seek to understand the conditions under which different groups are (and are not) successful in remedial programs.

Researchers should engage in varied measures of assessment (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) to arrive at a clearer understanding of the impact of remediation programs. Currently, most empirical evidence is based on large quantitative analyses of remedial programs and students. More qualitative research would better inform policymakers of experiences and outcomes that cannot be found and understood by quantitative approaches (Harper & Museus, 2007). Accordingly, qualitative research may help illuminate how postsecondary remediation affects particular groups of students, under what conditions, and in what contexts.
While engaging in a variety of approaches to assess the impact of postsecondary remediation is important, state and state higher education policy researchers should focus on using similar assessment tools to draw across-state comparisons. This would require all states to use the same metrics to engage in within and across state analyses. The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) is an evolving effort that involves all 50 states invested in securing longitudinal data on student outcomes (For more information visit http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/). Endorsed by Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan and House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller, the DQC has secured the involvement of many governors and other state legislators to develop an organized and unified approach of tracking student academic performance from prekindergarten to postsecondary education. Two of the variables the DQC tracks are enrollment in postsecondary remediation and persistence through college. While all states are involved in some capacity, state policymakers should consider fully committing to the information needed on all outcomes—in this case postsecondary remediation—to ensure the collection and dissemination of quality data.

**Policy**

In addition to continually evaluating postsecondary remediation to understand promising practices in postsecondary remedial education, states and school districts should invest in effective early intervention programs that offer academic and social support services for students with academic deficiencies at every level throughout the educational pipeline. In other words, immediately after states and schools identify students who are behind, early intervention programs should be made available for underserved and underperforming students to maintain “at proficient” levels of academic achievement. The early intervention programs that prove to be most effective should be extended to offer services beginning in early elementary school until at least the first year in college. Examples of effective early outreach programs that should be extended and better funded include Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP, visit www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/ for more information). These interventions will help many African American and other underrepresented students become academically prepared for college who would otherwise require two or more remedial courses without such support.

There are also state-funded programs that have demonstrated that their program services help underprepared students gain access to college (Carey, 2008). For example, the College Reach-Out Program (CROP, visit Website, http://studentservices.fgcu.edu/CROP/), enacted in 1983 by the Florida legislature, serves educationally and economically disadvantaged middle and high school students to motivate and prepare participants for postsecondary education. In the 2008-2009 academic year 72% of the CROP participants were African American students. The CROP works closely with two- and four-year colleges and is a popular model for states interested in reducing academic deficiencies and increasing preparation for postsecondary education among African American students.

It is also critical that elementary and secondary school teachers, counselors, and administrators focus more on encouraging African American students to enroll in college preparatory courses because research has shown that college preparatory courses increase preparedness for college (Hrabowski, 2003; Reid & Moore, 2008). Many schools, however, do not offer a college preparatory curriculum due to having minimal resources. In this case, school officials should consider working with the non-profit organizations that sponsor Early College High Schools (ECHS, for more information visit http://www.earlycolleges.org/). These programs provide intense academic and social support services in schools to help underrepresented students earn a high school diploma and college credit.

Additionally, school districts should enact policies and institute practices that guide improvement in teacher quality for African American students. Research has shown that a disproportionate number of teachers in poor, urban school districts are novice and unqualified
(Bell & Clark, 1998). With the lack of qualified teachers in low-income, urban schools, it is not surprising that many African American students are academically underprepared for college, thereby, prompting the need for postsecondary remediation. According to research, improving teacher quality would have a strong impact on African American students’ ability to access higher education and greatly improve their college completion rates (Peske & Haycock, 2006). A growing body of research (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lewis et al., 2008) has offered ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsible school environments can change learning opportunities for African American students, especially in subjects that African Americans generally require postsecondary remediation.

Finally, states should change the way elementary and secondary school districts are financed. Currently, school districts are financed by local property taxes and this dynamic naturally disadvantages schools in low-income, urban communities. It has been well-documented that school districts where there are a disproportionate number of African American students receive less adjusted state and local funds per pupil compared to districts with fewer students of color (Green, 2008). Consequently, the disparity in how schools are funded greatly exacerbates the achievement gap between African American and White students (Green, 2008). States should enact policies that ensure an equitable distribution of funds. This would create an opportunity for school officials to secure more qualified teachers, appropriate equipment, and educational materials to facilitate the production of innovative, culturally relevant instruction and learning.

CONCLUSION

There will be students who are academically underprepared and therefore require postsecondary remediation for a very long time because of the depth and breadth of inequities in American education. However, the need for remediation in higher education can be reduced if states, higher education systems, and elementary and secondary schools work toward providing effective opportunities for academically underprepared African American students to resolve academic deficiencies early in their educational journey. Meanwhile, in an era where elementary and secondary schools—especially in urban, predominantly African American schools—are struggling to provide their students with the college preparatory resources and skills to ascertain equal college access and opportunity compared to well-equipped schools, the words of the former Harvard University President, Charles W. Eliot, seem to be more relevant today than ever before: “the American college is obliged to supplement the American school. Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply” (Spann, 2000, p. 2).

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REFERENCES


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