The pros and cons of co-requisite remediation  

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I recently wrote about two studies whose results showed promise in the use of co-requisite remediation (students simultaneously taking a developmental and a credit-bearing course in the same subject). The strategy is aimed at getting college students up to speed faster, thus cutting time and costs associated with degree completion (both in two-year and four-year colleges). Now two more studies on this topic offer additional insights.

First up is Iris Palmer’ plan to scale up co-requisite remediation models based on the experiences of pilot programs in five states. These pilots either a) fully replaced traditional prerequisite remediation with a co-requisite model as described above or b) created two different tracks into which students were slotted based on ACT score cutoffs identified by the community colleges. She identifies the subtle variations that different colleges employed (class size, test cutoff points, integration of remediation with credit-bearing content, etc.) and identifies the stakeholders within college hierarchies who would have the best vantage point and leverage to make the needed systemic changes. Who knew that registrars had that kind of power? I jest, but Palmer insists that redesigning an institution’s remediation process “needs to be someone’s full-time job” to be done right—and that state-level support for institutions (funding, policy changes, best practices, etc.) is crucial as well. These are stolid institutions whose practices don’t change easily.

Secondly, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia concurred with Palmer that co-requisite remediation worked better than the traditional prerequisite model at getting students to credit-bearing courses, but they wanted to know whether it was more efficient. Their recent research brief built a cost-benefit model for both remediation models as practiced in Tennessee. Researchers found that even with big upfront costs for making the systemic changes Palmer described, co-requisite and prerequisite remediation models ended up costing nearly the same to run. The obvious higher cost of running two courses at once at the outset (credit-bearing courses must be offered to all students who are in remediation,
requiring additional instructors to accommodate the increased enrollment) was generally balanced by fewer remedial courses being needed down the line. However small, it’s still an increase in expenditures. But when cost-per-successful-student is factored in, the efficiency of co-requisite remediation was significantly higher, especially in math. Those want to blunt the remediation crisis in higher education will seize upon the cost-per-success numbers as the full picture; but we must tread carefully. The upfront costs for colleges are substantial, and it is a sea change for any college to commit even more resources to students who are, for all intents and purposes, unready for college. Additionally, co-requisite remediation, even at its best, does not work for every student. The CCRC report ends with this last point and calls for more investigation into improving student assignment and program delivery.

If the co-requisite remediation movement is to gain traction, it will be important for colleges to keep a firm eye on that cost-per-successful-student figure rather than on the initial outlay and systemic upheaval that must happen first. Hopefully, promising reforms in K–12 education (higher standards, early college programs, CTE, mastery learning, etc.) will lessen the need for remediation of any kind in college—even if it takes many years.

SOURCE: Iris Palmer, “How to Fix Remediation at Scale,” New America (March 2016)