



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

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Pathways through Montgomery College: Developmental Education

Accessibility is a fundamental characteristic of community colleges: our doors are open to all. Some students who arrive at community colleges, however, are not prepared for college-level work, because of academic training, learning style, or linguistic background. This is where developmental education—in other eras, called “remedial education”—fills in the gap. MC offers developmental education courses in English, reading, and mathematics. While students do not earn college credit for these courses, they are able to use financial aid for them. The drawback is that the aid dollars used for developmental ed courses count against the student’s final total. So the more classes one takes in developmental education, the fewer dollars one has left for the credit courses that count toward a degree.

For this reason—along with other financial pressures facing community colleges—there is a movement to streamline such course work in order to help students maximize their credits and allow institutions to teach more credit-bearing courses, practices that ultimately drive student completion. In this issue of *President’s Focus* I will explore the profile of developmental education at MC, some experimental redesigns, their results, and implications for the College.

Redesigning America’s Community Colleges, by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins has a chapter devoted to the latest research in the field of developmental education. I am pleased to say that the



College has embraced several recommendations from the latest research and is rigorously improving its instruction and course design based on peer models and campus-based pilots. The Achieving the Dream (ATD) network, which MC recently joined, also provides extensive resources on developmental education among its tools for assessing individual colleges' programs and we intend to make use of them in the near future.

According to a 2016 national study by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), 68 percent of community college students require at least some developmental education. About 66 percent of entering first-time students at MC in 2015 needed at least one development class. A 2014 report by the Montgomery County Council's Office of Legislative Oversight observed that standardized testing of students within Montgomery County public schools in 2013 revealed that "half or less of all MCPS graduates are college-ready." Our assessments found similar results: of all the MCPS graduates entering MC for the first time last fall, 75 percent of them needed at least one developmental class; of students entering for the first time from other schools, 53 percent of them needed developmental ed. Of first-year students who enrolled in MC in 2015, 31 percent of them needed developmental English coursework and 61 percent needed developmental math, while some needed both.

One explanation for the high rate of development ed qualifiers is explored in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*. Since students are placed in developmental education based on their score on a standardized placement test—Accuplacer is used at MC—one hypothesis to explain the number of low-scoring students is that students are not instructed to prepare for the test. As Bailey et al. relate, students are often told before the test that results are not important or that there is no need for them to study for it. Critics have observed that this may work against students who are just coming off summer break and have not reviewed any academics for a few months, or in the case of returning students, for several years.

Assessment

Each student who enrolls at MC must be assessed for college readiness. The 2013 College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act (CCRCCA) requires all Maryland public high



school students to take a college and career readiness assessment in English and mathematics by the end of Grade 11. Students can satisfy this by taking the SAT or ACT, and they can use their scores to be placed in appropriate levels at the College: an SAT score of 500 in math and English, or an ACT score of 21 in math and English, labels student as prepared for college-level coursework. Special conditions apply to non-native speakers of English: students who have been in the US education system for fewer than 10 years can elect to take the standard SAT or ACT, or they can opt for the ESL Accuplacer.

A student applicant to MC who has taken none of these tests is directed by letter, after enrollment, to take the math and English Accuplacer exams. Both the math and English disciplines at MC have made recent efforts to increase student awareness of the importance of student scores on these exams, putting links on their website to practice activities provided by College Board, the testing company that produces Accuplacer, and to an Accuplacer Study App. Another resource is in Workforce Development & Continuing Education, which has recently created an online Accuplacer Prep course that lasts 10 weeks.

The math department encourages students to prepare for the Accuplacer by providing questions designed by faculty members for review on the developmental education website. Students can come into learning centers even before enrolling at MC for help preparing for the Accuplacer. Trying to help students test into their first college courses as accurately as possible is important not only for financial reasons, but also for student morale. Many researchers observe that students in developmental classes lose motivation easily when they perceive that they are somehow “behind” their peers, and are assigned developmental classes.

Certain trends in developmental placement are worth mentioning as they underscore the need for our efforts to close the achievement gap at MC. When sorted by racial/ethnic background, first-time entering students in the following categories needed at least one developmental class: Hispanic, 75 percent; African American, 69 percent; White, 61 percent; Asian: 47 percent; and multiracial: 70 percent. The differences between students who place into developmental education as recent high school graduates compared to returning adults, are also notable. Among students aged 20 or younger, 73 percent needed at least one developmental ed class; among students aged 21



–29, 44 percent needed a developmental ed class; and among student 30 or older, only 39 percent needed a developmental class.

Progress through Developmental Courses

One of the concerns of community college researchers such as Bailey is the speed at which students progress through developmental courses. Morale, finances, and time can all be lost if students spend too much time in such classes. Both math and English at MC are improving these dynamics with unique approaches.

In 2011 the math discipline redesigned the series of developmental classes from two required classes (Beginning Algebra and Intermediate Algebra, previously three “contact” hours each) were combined into single course (Math Prep, three contact hours), which students can complete in a single semester at their own pace. By enhancing traditional classroom instruction with videos that students can play back repeatedly at their own pace, and laboratory time when students can get individualized help, students use their time and the instructor’s more efficiently. Students who went on to take college-level math at MC after these developmental classes had higher pass rates after the redesign than before: 47 percent pass rate in 2007–2008 before the redesign compared to 59 percent pass rate in 2012–2013. The differences reflect the success of the curricular and instructional changes with more students passing math in less time. With an average of 5,000 students per semester taking developmental math, these are important markers.

Another element of the math redesign has been an acknowledgement that not all students need the same type of math. In 2006 the College separated developmental algebra into two tracks: one called Intermediate Algebra, worth four contact hours and intended for STEM majors; and Intermediate Algebra for Liberal Arts, worth three contact hours. This adjustment reflects a reality highlighted by Bailey et al., that students who are focused on liberal arts degrees may be unnecessarily delayed by math courses not required by their major. This MC pilot was profiled in a *Washington Post* [article](#) in 2015.

One final adjustment to developmental math evens the field for students who may have been under-placed by the Accuplacer exam. In 2015 a pilot combined the Accuplacer math scores that



students received with reviews of their high school transcripts. Students who had earned an A or B in their high school Algebra II class, but had scored below the cutoff on the Accuplacer, were invited to enroll in college-level math. Of the 19 students invited to take part in the math pilot last spring, 18 received passing grades in college-level math, 13 with As or Bs. This pass rate is higher than the rate for students who passed above the Accuplacer cutoff. In the fall 2015 semester, 49 students enrolled in the math pilot and they passed at rates equal to their peers in developmental math, about 70 percent.

MC has recently been awarded a grant in partnership with 12 other Maryland education institutions to enhance developmental math education. The First in the World Grant Maryland Mathematics Reform Initiative was given by the University System of Maryland in fall 2015. Tailored to help create a “pathway” to statistics—an alternative to algebra for students not seeking a STEM major—it aims to create a third developmental path into statistics. This pathway would serve students in the lowest level of developmental math and help to move them up in one semester as opposed to two. The courses are scheduled to launch in fall of 2016 at MC and partner schools.

Developmental English is also working diligently to support students more thoroughly in their progress through coursework. One strategy for this is combining what have been traditionally two separate courses: reading and English. The Accuplacer provides both a reading score and an English score for students who take it; some of those students who score below the minimum for both subjects were traditionally directed into separate developmental classes in each field. With the redesign of developmental English, four stand-alone courses morph into two integrated reading and writing courses. This can ultimately save students time and cost, allowing them to reach college-level courses faster and better prepared to succeed.

Since spring of 2012, MC has implemented the Program for Advancement to College English (PACE), designed for students who placed into developmental English but scored above the cutoff for developmental reading. English faculty believed that such students—because of their advanced reading skills—could also be successful in college-level English classes with appropriate instruction and academic support. The PACE class is reduced in size to allow for more individualized instruction, and a tutor spends 15 hours in the classroom, in addition to the regular



instructor, over the course of the semester. In the fall 2015 semester, a record number of developmental students were served by the program: 192 first-semester Montgomery College students were supported in 24 sections of English 101A PACE. Currently there are 54 developmental students enrolled in 12 PACE courses across the three campuses (enrollment is generally lower in the spring, which explains the drop). PACE not only appears to move students more quickly through classes, but their retention rates are solid as well: 65 percent of the students in the original 2012 PACE cohort were still attending Montgomery College three semesters later.

A second strategy for accelerating developmental English progress is a pilot program, similar to the math pilot, in which high school transcript review is part of student assessment. In the fall of 2015, students who placed into developmental English but had earned an A or a B in AP English, honors English, or modern world history were invited to enroll in college-level English at MC. In fall 2015, 97 students participated in the pilot program for English. The outcomes were very promising: 86 percent of the students earned a C or higher in college-level English. The success rate for these pilot students is higher than the success rate for the general English 101A student at 74 percent passing the course with a C or higher.

Developmental education is evolving at a rapid pace, and garnering national attention. Last month alone, articles in both the [Atlantic](#) and [Inside Higher Ed](#) addressed the complexities of the subject and the benefits of redesigns. I am pleased that MC's faculty are leading the way to improved outcomes for our students: curricular and instructional redesigns, along with pilot programs, are helping MC to propel students efficiently through developmental education so they can begin taking courses that count toward degrees. While questions remain nationwide about the underlying factors that allow so many students to graduate from high school apparently underprepared for college, there is some good news. Students who complete their developmental coursework at MC go on to graduate or transfer at the same rates as students who arrived at MC college-ready. In our parlance, that's empowering students and enriching lives.



Discussion Questions:

1. What information stood out to you in this report?
2. Should the Accuplacer itself be re-evaluated in light of faculty concerns that it is under placing some students?
3. Should MC have goals that include reducing our developmental ed classes, in order to further teaching and learning that propels students to a degree or certificate?

