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Grade Point

Remedial classes have become a hidden cost of college

By Danielle Douglas-Gabriel April 6, 2016

One in four students have to enroll in remedial classes their first year of college, costing their families nearly $1.5 billion, according to a study released Wednesday by Education Reform Now, a think tank.

Colleges often require students with weak academic records to take courses to help them catch up to the rest of their classmates, but those remedial classes don't count toward a degree. Not only do students have to pay for remediation, they can end up paying more in tuition and fees because those courses often delay them from graduating on time. This expensive solution to sub-par K-12 education exacerbates the problem of college affordability.

What's striking about the report is it dispels the widely held belief that only low-income or community college students are saddled with remedial courses. As it turns out, 45 percent of students enrolled in such classes hail from middle- and upper-income families. Nearly half of all students taking remedial classes attend public and private four-year colleges, while the remainder are enrolled in community colleges, according to the report.

"People are underestimating the breadth and depth of high school underperformance. They think it's not their kids," said Michael Dannenberg of Education Reform Now, a co-author of the report.

Across all institutions, students report taking two remedial courses during their first year. Students on average pay an extra $3,000 and borrow nearly $1,000 for remedial coursework, according to the report, which used data from the Department of Education. The costs are four times higher for wealthy students, whose families earn more than $113,440 a year, attending private universities. Researchers found wealthy students at expensive, private four-year colleges take more remedial classes than their lower-income peers at those same schools, suggesting these colleges are enrolling low-achieving, high-income students.

"For many nonprofit private colleges, the admissions and financial aid process is really about enrollment management and maximizing revenue," said Dannenberg, a former official in the Department of Education.

Cost is not the only detriment of remediation. Researchers found that full-time undergraduate students who take such courses their first year are 74 percent more likely to drop out of college.

"These students face such drastically higher odds of never getting a degree. And if you end up degreeless with debt, then you don't have the benefits of added earning power and you're four times more likely to default on your student loans," said Mary Nguyen Barry of Education Reform Now, who co-authored the report.

Those who do graduate take almost a year longer than their peers to complete a bachelor's degree, according to the report. Spending an extra year in college isn't cheap. One year at a four-year public university, including tuition, fees, and room and board, cost an average $14,120 for a full-time, in-state student in 2015-2016 — and that's after taking grants, scholarships and tax credits into account, according to the College Board. At private, nonprofit colleges, the average net price is almost double, at $26,400.

The nonprofit Complete College America has called on universities to offer remediation alongside college-level courses, instead of having students take remedial classes before their core courses. That way, students can at least stay on track to graduate within four years and avoid spending more money to obtain a degree.

Connecticut recently passed a law requiring all state colleges to embed remedial education into standard, credit-bearing courses, offering extra tutoring to students in need of the help.

Barry says reforms have to start even earlier at the K-12 level. The rise in college remediation, she says, has shifted the expenses of a public k-12 education system into the more privatized higher education market. In other words, families are footing the bill for the failures of primary and secondary school systems.

"No student should be graduating high school unprepared for college," Barry said. "There are opportunities for high schools to do better and assess their students in that junior year, using that assessment for advancement or intervention well before they reach college."

In Tennessee, four community colleges are running math labs for local high school students struggling with the subject. More than three-quarters of students taking the dual-enrollment course at Chattanooga State Community College, for instance, have successfully completed it. The results have led the state to invest $1.1 million in the project.

At a time when some state legislatures are trimming their budgets, it may prove difficult to replicate the Tennessee model. Still, Barry said it would behoove policymakers to look at education as one continuous pipeline to improve overall outcomes.

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