

My name is Jason B. Jones, and I am an associate professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, where I am also the president of the American Association of University Professors chapter.

Senator Bye, Representative Willis, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on SB 40: An Act Concerning Open Access to College-Level Courses.

Over the past several decades, debates over remediation in higher education have mounted in intensity. Students and parents are often concerned about spending money, or taking on loan debt, for courses that don't count toward graduation. Critics of public higher education argue that the *apparent* rise in remediation suggests that higher education is "dumbing down" its curriculum. And other critics argue either that placement tests are inadequately predictive of graduation rates, or that students who've been through remediation don't show markedly improved graduation rates.

Today I want to highlight two concerns, one about the critiques of remediation, and the other about the proposed solution.

**1. Multi-factor studies, as opposed to think tank reports, do not show that remediation is an impediment to success.** It is true that students who place into remediation have lower graduation rates. Critics infer from this that remediation is a barrier, and if we eliminate it, graduation rates will go up.

There is bad news on this front, however: In studies that add another factor about the student's pre-college academic background--usually weak high school preparation, the allegedly harmful effects of remediation fade into the noise. (See Attewell, et al., who argue that controlling for pre-existing skill differences entirely explains the variable graduation rates associated with remedial courses, esp. for underprivileged and for community college students.)

I know that the committee is also looking today at measures to improve college readiness in high schools. Those measures are the ones that are likely to prove efficacious.

**1. The proposed change is too dramatic, especially given the uncertainty about the cause of these problems.**

Students who are able to take courses for which they are not prepared will fail them more frequently. This will particularly be a problem in STEM and social science courses, which rely on math as a prerequisite or co-requisite. Faculty members will have to judge whether a student's struggles arise from failing to master the content or from the

need for math or writing remediation. The latter is a real challenge, one for which few faculty members are trained: Writers' prose falls apart when learning new content. Discerning the need for remediation from a more typical engagement with new material isn't apparent.

It would also require a massive redeployment of university resources away from teaching faculty, and towards either peer- or other tutors, or (as is rumored) third-party solutions, including ones marketed by those trumpeting the failure of remediation.

Finally, I would say that there are other, simpler models. At Rider University, for example, "remediation" was abolished, and students now place into math and English courses as they do into foreign languages. The notion of sequence is preserved, but students are not taking classes for which they get no credit. I am sure that other interesting models exist, and I look forward to a productive dialogue about this going forward.

Cite:

Attewell, Paul A., David E. Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey. "New Evidence on College Remediation." *Journal of Higher Education* 77.5 (Sept.-Oct 2006): 886-924).