Introduction

Low rates of success for students placed into developmental education have left researchers and practitioners seeking ways to improve remediation. Various approaches have been suggested to change the way students are placed into, taught, and supported through developmental courses. Recent studies by Complete College America (2012) and the Community College Research Center (Scott-Clayton, 2012) have suggested that, at least in some cases, students who are initially placed into developmental education would be more likely to succeed if they were accelerated — that is, placed into higher-level courses with the appropriate support. Here, we explore the underlying reasons why acceleration works, as well as evidence of effective strategies to drive student success.

Problems with Current Practices in Developmental Education

The current remedial sequence is too long. A 2008 study by the Community College Research Center (CCRC; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho) followed students in developmental education starting with the moment students were placed. They found that only 31% of students in math and 44% of students in reading completed their developmental sequences and that a large percentage (40% and 41%, respectively) failed to enroll after placement. Additionally, they found that, as students were placed in lower and lower levels of remediation, their likelihood of completing the developmental sequence decreased. Ultimately, they concluded that the developmental sequence presented an “obstacle course” for entering students. Those who depart before enrolling in the course may be discouraged by being labeled “not ready for college.” For those who do enroll, the prospect of facing as many as three or four semesters of developmental courses can seem “confusing, intimidating, and boring” (p. 34).
Current placement tests are insufficient — failing to measure all the skills that could determine a student’s success. A large body of research has shown that “noncognitive factors,” such as commitment, intentionality, social connection, time management, and study skills, play a key role in student success (e.g., Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Robbins, et al., 2004, 2009). When examining student retention, noncognitive factors play an even greater role than academic ability or socioeconomic status (Robbins et al., 2004). However, current placement decisions are based entirely on academic ability, leading some researchers to suggest that we should expand the criteria on which we base placement decisions (e.g., Boylan, 2009; Burdman, 2012; Conley, 2007; Levine-Brown, Bonham, Saxon, & Boylan, 2008). If assessments indicate that students are likely to put forth effort, organize their work, and seek the resources necessary to help them succeed, then they may be able to be placed in a higher-level course with an equal or greater chance of success — both within that course and throughout their academic career (see below).

What we can do:
- Better understand student success through holistic placement.
- When reasonable, accelerate students to a higher-level course.
- Provide pre-class advising, monitor class behavior, support students with advising and tutoring.

Shortening the sequence increases students’ likelihood of success. At least one recent, large-scale study has used existing data to demonstrate that, in many cases, students could be accelerated and have equal or greater chances for success. A 2012 study by the CCRC (Scott-Clayton) used data on expanded indicators of success (i.e., high school GPA, high school location, time since high school graduation) to assess placement accuracy of more than 40,000 students in an urban community college system. Interestingly, the study used this expanded set of predictors first to develop a model of success for college-level students, and then to fit that model to students placed in developmental education to determine whether or not those students would have succeeded if placed in another course. The findings revealed that, when using placement tests alone, 18.3% and 28.9% of students in math and English remediation, respectively, were “underplaced” (placed into developmental courses when the model predicted they would have achieved a B or better in the college-level course), while 5.8% of math and 4.5% of English college-level students were “overplaced” (placed into a college-level course when the model predicted they would fail). This study shows that, even with a limited set of additional indicators, we can significantly increase the accuracy of course placement. Moreover, this accuracy is more often obtained through accelerating capable students into higher-level courses, rather than placing students into lower levels.

Driving Student Success Requires a Holistic Approach

We do not believe that simply accelerating students without proper guidance will work. A key component to accelerating students is the support we provide once they enroll. In a study at Wilbur Wright College in Chicago, Li et al. (in press) found that meeting class expectations (e.g., doing homework, attending class, asking questions) within the first three weeks was critical to passing and to increased knowledge. Another CCRC study (Edgecombe, 2011) has reviewed both the various types of acceleration and the existing research that supports its effectiveness. Although research
does show that acceleration can be an effective strategy, the author also explains that there are several models of acceleration, and that the extant research shows variance in their effectiveness. The models that closely relate to our discussion here involve accelerating students with either co-curricular supports or through a “co-requisite model,” such as that developed by the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County. Here, students are placed into higher-level courses while simultaneously enrolling in a complementary course that provides additional instruction and peer support. According to the CCRC’s findings, the ALP model has been shown to be quite effective (see also, Complete College America, 2012), while the effectiveness of other supports (e.g., Supplemental Instruction) has yet to be determined.

**Ultimately, we would recommend against accelerating students into a higher level without providing the necessary support systems to help them succeed.** These studies have shown that acceleration can work as long as students are provided with the appropriate support. Moreover, Robbins et al. (2009) reviewed more than 100 research studies to determine which interventions were most effective in increasing course performance and retention outcomes. They found that successful efforts focused on academic skills, encouraging students to meet class expectations by showing up on time, completing their work, and participating in class. Second, they were based in the classroom, where faculty and staff have the greatest chance of interacting with students. Third, effective interventions also focus on key psychosocial factors, such as motivation, emotional control, and social connections. Therefore it is not enough to accelerate students, or to accelerate them with supports; we must accelerate them with the right supports.

**Conclusion**

With such low rates of success, there are likely many ways to improve developmental education. Efforts such as increased alignment between secondary and postsecondary education, improved placement tests, curricular redesign, and better support for students should all be considered. However, given the long and winding road of the developmental sequence and the inadequacy of our existing placement systems, we should accept that initial placement decisions are not fully accurate. With well-designed supports we can accelerate students to higher-level courses and shorten their path to success.
References


