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Report: Over a third of students entering college need remedial help

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Cheyanna Wilson graduated from Chicago's Curie High School with a 3.0 grade-point average that included a B in a "College Algebra" class.

At Malcolm X College, where she enrolled to earn an associate's degree in accounting, she did not meet basic math requirements. Before she could take accounting classes, she needed to take — and pay for — a non-credit remedial math course.

"I'd be in the math class I need to graduate now" if not for the remedial class, said Wilson, 21. As many as one-third of students entering higher education need to take some sort of remedial or developmental course, a class in the basics of reading, English or math covering material they should have learned in high school, according to a recent report by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington, D.C.-based policy group. While most four-year private and public universities offer remediation, the bulk of remedial work is done by community colleges, whose doors are open to anyone with a high school diploma or GED.

"It's like a track meet where you have [students] run another lap to get to the start line instead of moving toward the finish line," said Bob Wise, Alliance president.

By a number of indicators, hundreds of thousands of high school students are graduating unprepared for the rigors of college. Nationally, in 2010, only 24 percent of ACT-tested high school graduates were deemed college ready in all four subjects tested — English, math, reading and science. In Illinois, only 23 percent met those benchmarks.

In 2008, an estimated 44 percent of students under 25 at a public two-year college and 27 percent of all students under 25 at public four-year schools were taking at least one remedial course, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics.

A survey by an education non-profit group showed that four out of five students taking remedial classes graduated from high school with a GPA above 3.0.

"This is the reality," said Dolores Perin, a senior research associate with the Community College Research Center at Columbia University in New York. "Many students are graduating from high school with low skills."

Illinois doesn't track its remedial students as closely as other states — the state currently cannot provide a look at how many incoming freshmen, straight out of high school, need developmental classes, for instance. The Illinois Community College board does say nearly 116,000 students — 21 percent of all community college students not enrolled in English as a Second Language, a vocational program or general studies — signed up for at least one remedial class in the 2010 fiscal year.

Chantal Cannon, 20, signed up for two remedial classes when she enrolled in City Colleges after graduating from John Marshall Metropolitan High School in 2009. She needed to take remedial math and

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English classes, something that surprised her after coming out of high school with Bs and Cs.

"I loved math — that was my favorite subject in high school," she said. "This held me back a lot."

Beyond the statistics are the college classrooms across America filled with students retaking high school classes. Few know this better than City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Cheryl Hyman.

"One of the things I heard loud and clear from everyone was students are coming here unprepared for college," she said of when she started her job in 2010. "I had no idea I was going to find 90 percent of [degree-seeking] students that come here need some form of remediation. We know it's an issue, and we know it's an issue that will need a resolution."

Remediation will never completely disappear. Community colleges have long been home to nontraditional students, out of school for a decade or more who need the basics refreshed. Increasingly, though, remedial classes are filled with recent high school graduates with B or C averages who were unaware that for them, college wasn't going to start right away.

"A lot of them don't even know that they're going to get tested," said Alvin Bisarya, vice chancellor of strategy and institutional intelligence at the City Colleges. "They have the high school diploma, they come in and, rightfully so, because nobody told them, they thought they were just going to go into college credit."

Victoria Onifade, 20, a 2009 graduate of Uplift Community High School in Uptown, said she didn't know about placement testing at City Colleges until she enrolled.

"I didn't take it seriously," she said. "I'm mean, you're getting good grades in high school."

She didn't pass the English portion and used part of her Pell Grant to pay for the remedial class.

"It's a waste of time," she said.

A waste of money

It's also a waste of money for both students and taxpayers, Wise said. The Alliance report estimated that during the 2007-2008 school year, remediation nationally cost \$5.6 billion, \$2 billion of that in lost wages because remedial students are more likely not to graduate. In Illinois, the group put the remediation cost at \$155 million for 2007-2008.

Public higher education budgets are tight, and remediation competes with dollars for research and classes moving students toward a degree.

"As a taxpayer you're really taking a double hit," said Bisarya. "You pay once when the student is in public [high] school and you pay for it again when they come here."

Bisarya said for many schools, remediation is a "dirty word." At City Colleges, it's also an expensive one, which is why officials there publicly suggested ending the school's open admission policy last August.

While admissions will stay open, City Colleges started a pilot program for 200 Chicago Public Schools graduates this summer to hone their reading, writing and math skills so they can start college classes in the fall.

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Remediation costs City Colleges \$29.4 million, or \$1,668 per student, each year. For the Fall 2009 semester, of the more than 2,800 CPS high school graduates heading straight into City Colleges, 71 percent needed remedial reading, 81 percent needed remedial English and 94 percent needed remedial math. Forty percent of this group took two remedial courses, an additional 21 percent took three remedial courses and 10 percent took four courses.

For the students who test into the City Colleges' lowest level of remediation, the vast majority are not likely to transfer to and complete college-level entry courses. Only 17 percent of these math students and 26 percent of these English students successfully finished a college class in that subject, according to statistics from City Colleges.

"We know from nationwide studies, and we're doing our own studies, that you lose motivation, you lose momentum in remediation," Bisarya said. "They don't feel so great about not being in college-level courses."

While City Colleges leaders have been vocal about the issue, it's not just a city problem, or a community college problem. All but the most selective four-year universities in the state offer remedial or developmental courses, according to statistics from the Illinois Board of Higher Education. Community colleges in the suburbs are also dealing with high percentages of incoming freshmen who lack the basic skills to keep up in a college class.

"It's a pretty universal problem," said Debra Bragg, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign who works at the school's Office of Community College Research and Leadership. "It's a problem for all types of high schools"

It's not just schools who are paying. Students in remedial classes are less likely to graduate, burning through government-funded aid like Pell Grants meant to help students obtain a degree. And that same financial aid can't be used for some of the most basic remedial classes.

"They're like ghost credits," said Remona Barrett, 20, a Truman College student who hopes to transfer to a university for a social work degree but had to complete multiple levels of remedial math first. "Those credits aren't transferable. They don't count for anything."

Standards not aligned

High school teachers and administrators are either unaware of what is expected in college, or unable to align their curricula with college prep because the material on standardized tests does not match material colleges are looking for students to know. Colleges also use a variety of placement tests, which adds to the confusion over what students need to know.

"It starts in first grade," said Perin from Columbia. "Students aren't learning strong reading and writing skills and math and the problems get worse and worse. As kids get older it just gets harder and harder to do well in school."

There is a national push to better align K-12 education with college materials. In Illinois, seven community colleges are working with 70 local high schools on how to transition students successfully through its College and Career Readiness program.

"The alignment between high schools and colleges is not very good," Perin said. "High schools are not very familiar with what a student is going to need."

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In 2006, Elgin Community College was one of the first schools in the state to set up a monthly meeting of local high school teachers with community college staff. Then, about 24 percent of incoming freshman straight from high school were completely college ready. This year, that number was nearly 32 percent.

Mary Sotiroff, an Elgin High School math and science teacher, joined the group after hearing complaints from parents about their children not being college-ready. Sotiroff said high school teachers are judged based on their students' ACT and PSAT scores, tests that don't necessarily cover the material colleges are looking for.

"We realized we didn't understand each other's worlds very well," she said. "I think [community colleges] had a much slimmer list of requirements than we did, which I found refreshing. Then you could spend more time on the things that really mattered."

For Julie Schaid, Elgin Community College's associate dean for college readiness and school partnerships, the collaboration is good for all students, regardless of where they end up after high school.

"The partnership is not about students coming to community college as it is about students being college and career ready," she said. "We want the students to be ready so they have choices."

Bragg, from the U. of I., is evaluating the state's College and Career Readiness Act and said that discussions between educators at various levels have produced "very important conversations around closing the gap." Actually closing the gap, however, will take time.

"It's not a quick-fix kind of issue," Bragg said. "These are systems that have grown apart rather than grown together over the years."