

Don't Tell Me I'm Not "College Ready"

"College Ready." Those of us in higher education say the words "not college ready" all the time without thinking about how these words affect the students we're describing. Neither do we stop to consider how the label "not college ready" influences their peers' perception of them.

What are we telling students when we label them "not college ready?" There is no mystery about it. We are telling them unequivocally that they are *not* ready for college. We are telling them that they need an extra year or more of preparation before beginning college-level coursework. In the mind of students, we are telling them that they are basically in the "special education" college population.

Developmental education is a broken system. Not only does it demean the students who go into it, every indication is that it does not work. Regardless of the model (traditional developmental classes, accelerated classes, Mathways, bridge programs, paired courses, self-study modules), only 12 to 20 percent of students who start at the lowest developmental level eventually complete a college-level math course. If those are educators' best results, how can we really consider developmental education to be in any way successful? All of this led us to the question, "What if we just eliminated developmental math courses?"

So we did. We took all of the resources that we had been using to help students become college ready and reinvested those resources to help them pass a college-level math class. Below is the basic model that we implemented.

Enroll non-college-ready students in a college-level math course—either College Algebra, Business Math I, or Contemporary Math (also known as math for liberal arts majors). For students who test at the Adult Basic Education (ABE) level, we strongly encourage them to take Contemporary Math, but we still give them the option to take any of the three courses.

Make all non-college-ready students co-enroll in a two-credit-hour homework lab, which is facilitated by their college-level math instructor. This is the heart and soul of the program. We have found that within the first few weeks, students formed study groups and helped each other be successful.

Even though their homework is on the computer, they must write down each problem and show their work in a spiral notebook. This slows them down and makes

them think about what they are doing. It also provides a reference point if and when students have to complete their homework outside of the homework lab. It also serves as a resource to review for tests. The grade for this lab is based on attendance, the work they show in their notebook (we check weekly to see that they are working in it), and their homework grade from their math class. This lab is effective for two reasons. First, it gives students the opportunity to get much of their homework done at a time when the classroom instructor is available to assist them. Second, it provides student with the necessary motivation to do their homework. Lab instructors simply walk in and say, "Hey, all you have to do in this lab is your math homework, which you would have to do anyway since homework is 30 to 40 percent of your overall grade. So, you can't pass the regular math class without doing the homework. If you do that homework here in this lab, and write down what you're doing as you go along, then I guarantee you will get a B, and most likely an A for this lab class. It's basically a free GPA boost. Just come in consistently and work on your math homework, and you should get an A in this two-hour lab course."

Require students who test either at the ABE or Developmental II level to participate in three hours of individual tutoring each week—in other words, students who are at least two levels below college ready. They can either come to us during our office hours, or they can go to the campus tutoring center. We give them a form that they and their tutor must complete in order to show that they have received the required tutoring. These tutoring sheets are checked weekly.

That's it. We didn't change anything about the courses themselves. The content, the pace, and the difficulty level of the courses are exactly the same as they have always been. The results have been outstanding. During our pilot program of two semesters, 40 percent of ABE students were able to pass a college-level course on the first attempt. Among all non-college-ready students, the pass rate was 50 percent. This was a vast improvement over our previous developmental program. Under the old system, only 15 percent of ABE and Developmental II students actually persisted through all of the developmental coursework and went on to pass a college-level class. Currently, we have nearly three times as many developmental students completing college-level math, and they are doing it in far less time with far less cost.

Following are a few suggestions to follow and a few pitfalls to avoid when implementing a system such as this.

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1. Do not treat students like children. Treat them with respect and do not water down the truth. This includes telling them to “shape up or you are going to fail” when such statements are appropriate.
 2. Count the Homework Lab as a credit class. If you don’t count the lab as a credit class, the students will not take it seriously and will not attend.
 3. Know your students’ placement test scores. Depending on your school’s policies, you may not be able to access students’ test results. However, you need to know their test results to determine whether they should be enrolled in a lab, and whether they must go to tutoring. Also, knowing their scores helps instructors identify students who may need more attention in the early part of the semester.
 4. Students will resist writing work in their spiral notebooks. They will also resist going to extra tutoring. Instructors must check these things frequently and stress that students will fail if they do not do them.
 5. Have help in the homework lab. We have found that an instructor can effectively help about 12 students in a lab. We suggest having a work study student tutor for every 8 students above the 12.
 6. Make sure students have supplies. It seems silly to have to say it, but make sure they have paper and pencil, have set up their MathLab accounts, and have a calculator.

Instructors must not be half-hearted! They must be proactive and willing to sit down and work with each and every student. These “not-college-ready” students are capable of passing a college course, but they do need help. Not to mention, students can sense an instructor’s commitment and enthusiasm. An apathetic instructor will have apathetic students. An instructor who is serious about his or her students’ education will see those students become serious about their education as well.

In conclusion, don’t tell a student that he or she is “not college ready.” Any motivated student is more “college ready” than standardized tests may indicate.

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