

Rethinking Basic Skills in Community Colleges
TRANSCRIPT

Airdate: June 21, 2012

Duration: 7:30 min

Produced by: John Tulenko

RAY SUAREZ: Now, why some community colleges are rethinking their approach to basic courses.

The schools have long been a place where students are required to fill in gaps in their high school educations, but there are important questions about how well it works. And now there's a move to change the way it's done.

Special correspondent John Tulenko from Learning Matters has the story.

JOHN TULENKO: Community colleges, with low tuition and open door admissions, are enrolling record numbers of students, especially minority students and returning adults, all of them with high hopes, says teacher Peter Adams.

PETER ADAMS, Community College of Baltimore County: They're coming here with a great emphasis on making their lives better. A lot of them have worked in fairly low-paying, insecure jobs, and they want a better career.

JOHN TULENKO: But as community colleges across the country have discovered, the vast majority of students arrives unprepared.

PETER ADAMS: And the first thing we say to them is, not so fast there. You're not really in college. You can't take college-level courses. You have got to take these developmental courses.

JOHN TULENKO: Catchup classes that do not count toward certificates and degrees, that's where more than half of all community college students and two-thirds of black and Latino students are placed.

REVONE GIFFORD, student: I have had to take a lot of non-credit classes. I don't want my kids to end up like I was. I want them to have the knowledge to be able to go to college.

JOHN TULENKO: After she was laid off last year, ReVone Gifford went back to school to earn a social work degree. It's her third attempt at community college since graduating high school in 1994. Her previous tries stalled at developmental math.

REVONE GIFFORD: I hated it. The professors would go so fast. And if you ask a question, I have to break down each thing, and I might ask 30 questions on one subject. I couldn't keep up.

JOHN TULENKO: Like ReVone, 40 percent of all students required to enroll in basic skills courses find their college dreams end there.

Learning Matters, Inc.

STAN JONES, Complete College America: It's a great individual cost. They have spent tuition money and their time, and they walk away with nothing. But the state is paying a price, too, because the state is paying for that as well.

JOHN TULENKO: According to advocates like Stan Jones of Complete College America, basic skills courses cost taxpayers about \$3 billion each year.

STAN JONES: It doesn't work. Actually, if you and I were both assigned to take remedial courses, and you skipped it, you would actually do better in your first math course than I would, having taken the remedial sequence.

JOHN TULENKO: At many places, remedial courses simply repeat the kind of instruction that didn't work in high school. It's no wonder the results are the same. But now a growing number of community colleges are trying new approaches to help the least prepared students succeed.

Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland is one of them. Here, half the students in basic skills math courses were failing, so, last fall, the community college gave new students the option of taking the course online.

ALICIA MORSE, Anne Arundel Community College: They're working where they need to work. Students come in with different holes, say, in their mathematical backgrounds. Some people might just need small pieces filled in; other people may never have studied, say, algebra in their life. Lecture class doesn't allow that flexibility.

JOHN TULENKO: Math department chair Alicia Morse helped start the new program.

ALICIA MORSE: The computer provides small video lectures. It provides PowerPoints. It provides step-by-step solutions at the problem level. So it's a very robust learning system, and it gives them options.

REVONE GIFFORD: I like it because I can go back and break it down. I don't feel threatened by not having -- it shows me how to do it, and that's why I think it works best for me.

JOHN TULENKO: Students attend lab classes twice a week, but they can also work online even on smartphones and finish the course sooner.

Elsewhere, short computer-based courses targeting only areas of weakness, called mini-modules, have replaced semester-long remediation. For many students, the enemy is time.

STAN JONES: It's really about attrition. It takes too long to get to the regular college level work.

JOHN TULENKO: How long can a student be in remedial courses?

STAN JONES: As long as two years.

JOHN TULENKO: Long stints in remediation used to be the norm at the Community College of Baltimore County, and students were unhappy from the start. Peters Adams teaches basic skills writing.

PETER ADAMS: For the first three or four weeks, the students are all really depressed and sometimes hostile because their high school teacher always told them they were a good writer. Why do they need this class? And how come they have to take this class and pay for it and do it all the work and they don't get credit?

JOHN TULENKO: Adams believed that hostility contributed to a nearly 70 percent dropout rate in remedial writing classes, so he proposed a new approach.

ROBERT MILLER, teacher: Do you have any questions about this class, English?

JOHN TULENKO: Today, developmental students jump straight into this full-credit English 101 class, right alongside their better prepared peers.

ROBERT MILLER: What is it about again?

JOHN TULENKO: Directly afterwards, they meet with the teacher for an extra hour of instruction.

PETER ADAMS: All of a sudden, there is no resentment. There's none of the hostility. The student no longer sees the developmental class as a hurdle keeping them from English 101. They're in English 101, and the developmental class is something they're taking that will help them in the class. So you no longer have to say, this will be really useful next semester; it's useful right now.

I thought it was going to be more difficult, but it's not.

JOHN TULENKO: Bob Miller teaches the class.

ROBERT MILLER: I can imagine some people thinking, is it bad for the students who are at grade level? No, I don't believe there's any effect at all. There's no dumbing down. There's no making it easier. The developmental students, they want to do better than the students who were placed directly into the first semester English.

JOHN TULENKO: From a 70 percent failure rate, basic skills writing now has a 70 percent pass rate. But community colleges have been slow to copy success.

Small classes like this are more expensive to run. Done the old way, remediation brings in badly needed tuition revenue that often supports other departments.

STAN JONES: It's its own industry now. There are dev-ed departments within most colleges. They bring in money on their remedial program.

JOHN TULENKO: So it's kind of the cash cow?

Learning Matters, Inc.

STAN JONES: It is. It's unto itself. And we're trying to break through this and say, but the point was to get these students in the credit courses.

JOHN TULENKO: Back at Anne Arundel Community College, more students are completing basic skills math, up from 50 percent to 60 percent.

ReVone Gifford, who found work while she was in school, had failed the class twice before trying it again on computers.

REVONE GIFFORD: I passed it. And to be able to go onto the next step, I feel much more intelligent. And my self-esteem gets a boost because I'm not failing, so it's the great -- you know, I love the feeling. It's great for me.

JOHN TULENKO: This spring, Ms. Gifford moved on to geometry, and passed that, too. Having finished her math requirements, she's well on her way to earning her degree.