

Florida colleges meet developmental ed challenge



Tutoring sessions, like this one at Miami Dade College, have become increasingly important in Florida as community colleges cope with statewide restrictions on developmental education. (Photo: MDC)

BY **ELLIE ASHFORD** JANUARY 13, 2020

Florida community colleges are seeing some positive results from a state law enacted in 2013 that upended developmental education.

Those results, however, came after colleges undertook massive efforts to implement the law: They redesigned curriculums and courses, shifted resources and staff, trained faculty, and hired more advisors.

While several states have passed laws trying to improve student success by restricting the amount of time students spend in non-credit developmental education classes, the law enacted in Florida in 2013 (SB 1720) is considered the most intrusive. It

doesn't just bar placement tests for most students; it has requirements on curriculum and reporting.

Florida's developmental reforms, like those in other states, happened because "we realized there was a problem," says Nikki Edgecombe, a senior research scholar at the [Community College Research Center](#). Too many students were referred to developmental education – involving multiple courses in a multi-semester sequence – which a majority of students weren't able to complete.

A different approach

SB 1720 requires colleges to give recent high school graduates the option of whether or not to take a placement test or to enroll in developmental education courses.

"Initially, there was great concern across the state," says Julie Alexander, vice provost for academic affairs at [Miami Dade College](#), who previously worked at the [Florida Department of Education](#) where she helped the state's 28 community colleges implement the law.

Under the law, students who earned a diploma from a public high school in Florida were immediately considered college-ready, Alexander says.

"That meant institutions had to quickly put in motion protocols for students who met that criteria," she says. "Their main concern was not being able to know the level of skills and abilities of incoming students."

The only students exempted, and thus still required to take a placement test, are students who earned a high school diploma before 2003, graduated from a private school in Florida or an out-of-state high school, earned a GED or were homeschooled.

The Florida law also requires developmental education courses – for those students who still have to or want to take them – to be taught in one of four instructional modes: compressed, modularized, co-requisite or contextualized.

Modest success

As a result of SB 1720, "outcomes did improve but in a modest way," says Shouping Hu, founding director of the [Center for Postsecondary Success](#) at Florida State University (CPS) and the lead author of a [comprehensive study](#) on the impact of the law released earlier this year.

According to early evidence from the study, "Florida's reform in developmental education is accelerating student progress while improving equity in outcomes

between racial/ethnic groups.”

Overall, enrollment in developmental courses has declined sharply since 2014. But that change has been more pronounced for black and Hispanic students than



St. Petersburg College has stepped up its advising and tutoring services. (Photo: SPC)

for white students. Statewide, the number of black students rose from 12 to 22 percent in college-level math, and from 49 to 72 percent in college-level English in their first semester.

Hispanic students taking college-level courses in their first semester increased from 22 to 32 percent in math and from 62 to 74 percent in English. For white students, the gains were smaller: from 25 to 33 percent in math and from 67 to 75 percent in English.

According to Hu, some of those improvements stem from the fact that before the Florida law was passed, minority students who took placement tests were disproportionately placed into developmental education.

Other factors that led to the higher success rates, Hu says, include proactive leadership by college leaders to reform developmental education before the law was enacted, enhanced advising and student supports, and strong collaboration among student affairs and academic affairs departments.

More research needed

While the developmental education reforms are paying off, Hu says, “there is still plenty of work to do to improve student success and equity in Florida.”

“Overall pass rates in gateway courses are still very low,” he notes. “That is not a pleasant situation, but it’s not a surprise. That is a problem facing American community colleges overall.”

However, there is a better understanding now that “more students are capable of completing college-level work than was previously thought,” says Edgcombe.

Students who previously would have been placed in developmental education but are now taking college-level courses need strong advising support, a coherent pathway where they can seamlessly progress, and access to financial aid, she adds.

“We know from evidence that any of these interventions alone is not going to effect changes in completion,” Edgcombe says. “Ideally, we want to knit all these together in a seamless way to meet the ultimate goal – completion and transfer.”

Are students college-ready?

After the law was enacted, [St. Petersburg College](#) (SPC) saw a big decline in the number of people signing up for developmental education in spring 2014, says Sabrina Crawford, assistant vice president of institutional effectiveness and academic services.

SPC’s initial concern was how to identify incoming students who might need extra help, Crawford says. The college ran multiple models on graduating high school seniors and developed an internal predictive modeling system to classify incoming students as likely to be college-ready, recommended for developmental education or strongly recommended for developmental education.

Among students who were recommended for developmental education and chose to take college-level math instead, the pass rates for that course “dropped significantly,” she says. Only about 30 percent of students passed the course.

The college subsequently changed its policy, so that students who opt out of developmental education have to take college-level English within their first six credit hours and college-level math within their first 13 credit hours, Crawford says. Students also are required to take math courses in a certain sequence.

Courses redesigned

At the same time, SPC’s math and communications departments started redesigning the curriculum and adding more classroom supports. The college introduced a gateway math course covering quantitative reasoning as an alternative to intermediate algebra for students in the liberal arts or other non-STEM fields.

“We did see some good success with that course,” says Jimmy Chang, dean of mathematics. During the past year-and-a-half, “we had a strong, courageous conversation about how to streamline that alternative math class even further.”

This fall, the college changed the requirements so that only students pursuing a STEM-related degree or those who haven't chosen a career path have to take college-level algebra, Chang says. As a result of that change, SPC saw a huge enrollment spike in liberal arts math, and an 18 percent decline in students taking basic algebra.

SPC also pilot-tested a co-requisite model in fall 2019, calling for students who are college-ready to simultaneously take college-level algebra and a one-credit lab. Chang says that algebra course, which he compares to a tier 3 developmental education course, is in a gray area: it doesn't count for math credit but does count for college credit.

Similar changes were made in the English requirements, and different session types were offered, including a compressed schedule and courses with an online component, says Joe Leopold, dean of communications. Leopold also worked with librarians and tutors on the changes in developmental education, calling on librarians to train students in library work, "hiring better, more committed tutors" and embedding tutors in classrooms.

The standardized English composition I course now has an 80 percent pass rate.

"We have a lot of work to do," Leopold says. "but we're anticipating problems better."

Upgraded advising

At Miami Dade, there was a large effort to overhaul advising, as well as "a massive engagement with the mathematics and English faculty to redesign the curriculum," Alexander says.

"We devoted a lot of resources to faculty development and had a huge action plan related to redesigning the developmental education curriculum and getting faculty prepared to teach in different ways," she says.

The college had received a Completion by Design grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation just before the Florida law was enacted, so "we had a lot of resources to help support the implementation," she notes.

Since the law was passed, the number of MDC students taking developmental education has declined by about 65 percent. Between 2017-18 and 2018-19, enrollment decreased by 37 percent in remedial math and 31 percent in remedial reading.

Because the number of developmental education courses was greatly reduced, faculty who taught those courses were given the option to take graduate-level courses so they



An advising session at Miami Dade College. (Photo: MDC)

could earn a credential to teach college-level work.

The syllabus, assessments and learning supports for some intermediate algebra sections, the first credit-bearing math course, were standardized,

Alexander says, and “the faculty went through rigorous and sustained training to engage students in ways that would be common across the sections.”

Faculty also standardized when struggling students should receive early alerts through the Blackboard learning management system and the type of interventions to get them back on track.

Those efforts were “incredibly successful,” Alexander says. The pass rate for the redesigned course was 10 percent higher than that of the traditional, unchanged intermediate algebra course.

Among those who completed the gateway course, the number of students progressing to the next course in the sequence has been strong, she says. “Student performance dipped initially but is now as strong or stronger than before.”

Colleges stepped up

Statewide, the results from the Florida law “are more positive than what I anticipated early on,” Alexander says.

“If colleges were given more time on the front end, they could have been more deliberate and more thoughtful in implementing various strategies – and could have gotten better returns,” she adds.

For example, it would have been helpful if colleges received more resources in the beginning to help them identify entering students who might have needed additional

support, Alexander says. Not being able to do that put faculty and students at a disadvantage.

While the Florida law has been effective, Alexander says she thinks most college officials across the state believe efforts to reduce developmental education “are best left at the institutional or collaborative systemic level, rather than a legislative prompt.”

“Even before the legislation, it was obvious to colleges that something needed to be done with developmental education. We recognized students were struggling and some were falling through the cracks,” Alexander says.

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