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## Academic support offerings go unused at community colleges <sup>[1]</sup>

Submitted by [Paul Fain](#) <sup>[2]</sup> on February 2, 2012 - 3:00am

The success of the “completion agenda” may hinge on whether community colleges set more mandatory requirements for students, and drop their reliance on making academic support offerings optional.

That’s the oft-stated argument of Kay McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, who likes to say “students don’t do optional.” Now a [new study](#) <sup>[3]</sup> from the center, which draws on research from four surveys of the community college sector, lends evidence to the case for mandatory.

Community colleges have a growing arsenal of tools that research shows will help students earn credentials -- like academic goal-setting, student success courses and tutoring. Yet the study found that relatively few students take advantage of those offerings.

Take remedial (or developmental) education, which many experts think is the academy’s biggest stumbling block. About three-quarters of community college students said they were required to take an academic placement test, according to the study, but only 28 percent said they used study materials or other aids provided by colleges to prepare for the test.

Nearly half of colleges -- about 48 percent -- offer placement test study aids, but only 13 percent of those that do make that test prep mandatory.

Those findings strongly suggest that more community college students could place out of remedial courses, which would accelerate their path to a credential.

“Colleges should create opportunities for students to participate in review or brush-up experiences before placement tests to minimize the amount of remediation students need,” according to the study.

Mandatory test prep could help more students avoid getting discouraged when they unnecessarily place into remedial courses, according to McClenney, preventing attitudes like the one a student expressed in a survey response: “My developmental class is ridiculously easy.”

The study draws data from three surveys the center conducts annually, as well as preliminary findings from an institutional survey. The newly launched survey tracks how “promising practices” for encouraging student success are being used at 228 participating colleges.

The other three surveys, which the center has conducted annually for several years, are the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement.

In addition to remedial education, the study found that academic support and planning may also be areas of “incongruity” between what colleges offer and what students use. About 87 percent of colleges reported offering supplemental instruction, but 82 percent of students said they’d never taken advantage of those services. And only 14 percent of colleges make supplemental instruction mandatory for developmental education students.

### Changing Attitudes

It’s hardly a newsflash that community college students often face myriad challenges outside class. About one in five full-time students works more than 30 hours per week, the study found. And 37 percent of part-time students report caring for dependents for at least 11 hours per week.

However, only 26 percent of entering students said a college staff member had talked with them about their outside commitments to help them decide how many courses to take, according to the study. That means community colleges are not offering adequate counseling services, and that too few students are accepting that help if it is offered.

The research also discovered a substantial disconnect between what students and faculty members think about student success. For example, faculty members were much more likely to cite outside influences -- like jobs and money problems -- as reasons that students withdraw from courses or colleges. About 81 percent of faculty members pointed to full-time work as a cause of withdrawal, compared to the 38 percent student response.

Changing attitudes at community colleges about mandatory requirements for students won’t be easy. McClenney said resistance is based on an “abundance of empathy” by educators who don’t want to place more burdens on already stretched-thin students. Also at play is the widely held belief that community college students should “have a right to fail.”

State budget-cutting also complicates efforts to help more of the 79 percent of entering community college students who reported that they aim to earn an associate degree make good on that goal.

As a result, community colleges need to make tough choices about what matters most, McClenney said. And she said the emotionally charged discussion in California <sup>[4]</sup> about student access is perhaps the best example.

McClenney applauds the push for community colleges in the state to cut back on offerings like physical education classes and fitness centers aimed at “educated and wealthy” adults, and to reallocate funds and other resources to developmental education offerings for first-time, full-time students.

But while California is the biggest example -- and one of the most extreme -- of a debate over priorities at community colleges, many other institutions are facing similar questions <sup>[5]</sup>. The litmus test of whether they’re headed in the right direction, McClenney said, is “are the colleges setting priorities that align with the needs of their students and communities?”