

Changes to remedial education aim to keep students on track and in school (</content/1302/changes-remedial-education-aim-keep-students-track-and-school>)

By: [Nick Blumberg](/users/nick-blumberg/) on 02/27/2013

Teaching Arizona's students is a challenge at every grade level, but perhaps especially so in the nation's largest community college system. Of recent high school graduates coming into the Maricopa Community Colleges, 40 percent can't read at a college level, and 30 percent can't write at a college level. In the third part of our series Educating Arizona, KJZZ's Nick Blumberg reports on a program that tries to keep those students on track and in school.

On a recent rainy morning, about 20 students are gathered in Mike Callaway's English 101 class at Mesa Community College. They're getting ready for a paper that's due soon by practicing peer review with a sample paper. Callaway has them read through it, and then break into groups to talk about things like the author's thesis and the way the writing is organized.



Mike Callaway is the Writing Program Administrator at Mesa Community College. (Photo by Nick Blumberg - KJZZ)

It's an ordinary-looking class on the surface, but it's actually part of a unique approach to remedial education. Instead of taking developmental English before they can enroll in English 101, students now take them at the same time, with a breakout section for developmental learners. It's called the Accelerated Learning Program, and it started in the Baltimore County community college system several years ago. Callaway said the data show it has helped students stay and succeed in school.

"They complete at the next level, so it's not just them being passed by their teacher," Callaway said. "They're actually completing 102, verified by a separate instructor that they have been successful in college writing."

And Callaway said the program brings with it a different style of teaching. The old model of developmental classes had students learning at a sentence structure level.

"We're trying to move away from that and start thinking about writing in the ways that people write outside of the classroom," Callaway said. "They think about their audiences, they think about their purpose. And they really focus on how they're going to achieve what they want to achieve with their writing."

That approach is in line with the state's new standards for K-12 public school students, known as [Common Core](http://www.kjzz.org/content/1302/common-core-standards-coming-arizona-schools) (<http://www.kjzz.org/content/1302/common-core-standards-coming-arizona-schools>). Schools are set to implement the Math and English standards by August 2014.

"We're really wanting them to be prepared for a variety of postsecondary options so that they can be successful and they can have choices," said Sarah Galetti, who works in the K-12 Academic Standards division of the [state education department](http://www.azed.gov/azcommoncore/) (<http://www.azed.gov/azcommoncore/>). She said instead of creating students who can regurgitate information, the state wants the children it educates to become thinkers, who can analyze information and seek out context.

Galetti said there are a variety of reasons students don't leave high school fully prepared for colleges and universities. But she sees Common Core as part of the solution to that problem. The curriculum plans out the material from kindergarten all the way up to 12th grade to ensure it gets progressively more difficult.

"We're really looking at this staircase of text complexity that will help to ensure that when they do reach that two-year, four-year, whatever it is beyond high school that they're choosing to do, that they're going to be prepared for the text that they're encountering," Galetti said.

"Coming out of high school, there are a significant number [of students] that are entering college and are still not prepared," said Brenda Bautsch, a Senior Policy Specialist with the [National Conference of State Legislatures](http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/improving-college-completion-reforming-remedial.aspx) (<http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/improving-college-completion-reforming-remedial.aspx>). She said Common Core aims to close the gap between what high schools think students need to know and what colleges think students need to know. If that happens, it'll be a welcome development for lawmakers.

Bautsch said the state legislators her organization works with see this as: "an issue of, taxpayers are paying twice to educate these students, they should have learned these skills and this knowledge in high school or even earlier, and instead they're having to re-



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learn it in college. So, states are spending more money. And then, obviously students are too.”

These challenges may not just delay a student’s progress ... sometimes, it can derail it. According to research from Columbia University, less than a quarter of community college students who test into developmental education classes earn their degree or certificate within eight years.

That means Mike Callaway’s developmental students are at risk of leaving higher education behind. Callaway said the Accelerated Learning Program is in its second year, but so far it’s been successful -- 75 percent of students who took the developmental course at the same time as English 101 progressed to the next class.

Callaway said many students don’t initially like the idea of taking an extra class. “But when they’re in that course, I think they’ve enjoyed it. It’s a smaller course; the breakout section has ten students or eight students. We get small group discussion. They get individualized instruction, and in the end I think they come to value that experience.”

So far, the results in Mesa match up with what educators in Baltimore saw. Students are more likely to succeed academically. And it’s more cost-effective, which could be a boon to students and schools.

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