

Maricopa colleges work to address remedial needs



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(Photo: Tom Tingle/THE Republic)

Michael Minjares looked through the window into the tutoring center at Scottsdale Community College and was afraid.

Minjares, 30, had faced down the enemy during two Army deployments to Iraq, where he rose to the rank of sergeant.

But overcoming his fear of stepping back into the classroom after his discharge from the military was an enormous challenge.

"I saw students in there working on calculus. And I wasn't going to walk in there and ask them to help me add two fractions together," he said.

Minjares, who graduated from Arcadia High School in 2003, had considered the military as a career. But when he was in Iraq, he realized he didn't want to be away from his family. He missed the birth of his daughter.

After returning to Arizona from Iraq in 2011, Minjares decided to enroll at Scottsdale Community College. For years, he had wanted to be an electrical engineer — ever since he met one on a job site where he was helping his electrician father. But he knew the transition would be difficult. Still adjusting to civilian life, he sometimes felt uncomfortable in large crowds. Plus he has a wife, four kids and two part-time jobs.

Then, he faced another obstacle: He needed to take remedial math, reading and English.

"It was demoralizing," Minjares said.

"I was a leader — a sergeant — and now I'm the back of the pack."

Minjares is not alone. About 60 percent of incoming students at the 10 colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District test into at least one remedial, or developmental-education, course. These classes, for people whose skills are not ready for college-level work, are offered in math, reading and writing. The courses are essentially high-school level, or even lower.

Maricopa Community Colleges' rate of students who need remedial help mirrors the rate for community colleges nationwide, according to an analysis by the Chronicle for Higher Education.

And, like Minjares, many have been away from the classroom for a while. For students who entered one of the Maricopa colleges in the fall of 2013, 79 percent who had been out of high school at least one year needed remedial classes, compared with about 54 percent of students registering within one year of high school.

To deal with this issue, programs have been introduced at several district locations that are proving successful in helping students make the transition through remedials and increase the likelihood they will remain in school.

Developmental education has huge costs. The colleges spend about \$90 million a year — more than 12 percent of the district's overall \$715 million operating budget — on staffing and resources for the courses.

And the costs are personal, as well.

The district's statistics show that students who begin in those remedial classes are less likely to graduate. About 20 percent of students who took a remedial course earned a degree within six years, compared with the overall six-year graduation rate of 28 percent.

One reason is that even though students pay for them, remedial classes don't earn credits toward a degree or credits that can transfer to a university. Students who test into the lowest levels of developmental education could conceivably take classes for more than a year before starting on college-level coursework that earns credits.

In Minjares' case, the GI Bill pays for his classes for only 36 months, and completing his degree in that time would have been nearly impossible with the amount of remedial courses he needed to take.

"I was already behind the learning curve. That was the challenge," he said.

Eventually, Minjares did walk into that tutoring center and got help.

And thanks to a new program at SCC to accelerate developmental education — part of a district initiative — he was able to complete his remedial classes quickly.

Minjares took classes full time every semester, including 19 credits last summer. Earlier this month, he graduated with an associate's degree. Next fall, he'll start classes at the Ira A. Fulton School of Engineering at Arizona State University.

As he began to succeed, he started working as a peer tutor with other struggling students.

"They want the answers, but college is about learning how to find the answers," he said.

Accelerating classes

Last year, the six-year graduation rate at the Maricopa colleges increased by 8 percentage points, to 28 percent. Nationally, the graduation rate for two-year public colleges has hovered around 20 percent for many years. In 2010, President Barack Obama challenged community colleges across the country to improve those rates.

Around that time, the Maricopa district was launching its own initiatives to get more students to earn degrees, certificates or credits toward transfer to a university. The colleges committed to improving the number of students who earn degrees or certificates by 50 percent by 2020.

Changes include requiring placement testing, advising and orientation and eliminating late enrollment. Also, the district standardized online-registration, financial-aid and log-in procedures among the colleges, easing the way for students to take classes in more than one location.

The district devoted more than \$10 million to those changes over the past five years, with some of the money coming from increases in student tuition and the county property tax.

One thing that wasn't changed was access. The colleges accept anyone who wants to attend.

"At the very heart of the matter is that if we are to truly meet the completion agenda of greatly increasing the number of people in Arizona and the U.S. earning college degrees, we cannot exclude this whole population of students who test into developmental education," said Daniel Corr, vice president of academic affairs at Scottsdale Community College.

"They're capable, they have every expectation of earning a college degree, and our economy needs them."

So as part of the success push, the colleges have been testing ways to not only get students through remedial courses faster, but also to improve their subsequent performance in college-level classes.

In 2012, SCC started a pilot program to accelerate students twice as quickly through remedial courses by having more frequent classes.

Minjares finished a 16-week remedial class in less than eight weeks, passed the assessment and then enrolled in the next remedial class midway through the semester rather than having to wait until the following semester.

Sara Cameron, English instructor and head of SCC's developmental-education committee, said combining the two courses into one semester creates a key timing element: If students don't pass the midsemester assessment, they're back on Monday to retake that eight-week class, rather than waiting over an extended break at semester's end.

"Over the winter break is where we lose them," Cameron said. "They don't come back."

The accelerated reading has shown good results. In the fall of 2013, 81 percent of students in SCC's middle-level remedial reading class passed, compared with 57 percent in fall 2012, before the change. They are also showing higher pass rates in subsequent college-level classes than before the initiative.

This past year, about two-thirds of students who tested into developmental reading and English took the new classes, but it will be 100 percent this fall.

At SCC, students can also take a developmental class concurrently with the college-level course instead of having to spread them over two semesters, and those who test at the highest remedial level can take a one-credit "boot camp" that meets only during the first three weeks of the semester rather than an entire 16-week course.

Cooperative learning

At South Mountain Community College in Phoenix, where two-thirds of the students are the first in their family to attend college, administrators developed a comprehensive program called the Foundations Academy, with the help of a \$2 million, five-year federal grant it received in 2011.

"Once our students make the decision to go to college, they become isolated," said Dolores Urbieto, a developmental math instructor. "They don't know exactly how to do it. They don't have someone to model it for them."

Students are required to take a "success" course that teaches study and goal-setting skills.

Part of the program is "cooperative learning," a teaching method in which students are grouped together to provide support for each other during remedial classes.

The developmental-education students also are required to attend workshops, tutoring, one-on-one conferences with instructors and, for those in remedial English, a writing lab.

"We know that students don't do optional, so we wanted to take away the option of struggling and the option of failing," said Dawn Thacker, an English instructor and coordinator of the tutoring center.

The initial results are promising.

For the highest level of remedial English, about two-thirds of students across the district complete the course, and of those, about two-thirds pass. For South Mountain students who were in the Foundations Academy last fall, more than 90 percent completed the course and 82 percent of those passed. Those results represented double-digit improvements from fall 2012 results at South Mountain.

Similar results were seen in remedial math classes.

"When they feel wanted, they thrive," Urbieto said. "It's not me calling them up to come to class. It's them. They're pulling each other."

Thacker said the program has taken "a small army" of tutors, instructors, counselors and advisers.

Seana Mitchell, 29, said the intensive help was crucial in helping her graduate from South Mountain earlier this month after testing into remedial classes three years ago.

"I was embarrassed because I had let my education sink so low. I didn't want to tell my family I was taking those courses," she said. "But I couldn't let this slip through my hands."

Again and again she went to the tutoring center and to office hours.

"The teachers gave guidelines on what I needed to do. They told me flat-out what was expected of me."

Eventually, Mitchell started taking honors classes. "I started understanding arguments and persuasion, and finally I realized — I can write."

This fall, she'll start classes at ASU.

Reviewing programs

Each college in the district is independently accredited and free to create its own programs.

After several semesters of progress, administrators at the district level will review the data to see which programs can become standard practice.

But the criteria for imposing a program on every college are tough, according to Maria Harper-Marinick, executive vice chancellor and provost.

"Rarely do we say for all 10 colleges, 'Let's do this,' " she said.

"If we have solid data that points to an efficiency and a practice that is scalable, we might say, 'We should all be doing that.' But we have to see trends.

"Some programs are very specific to certain populations at certain colleges," she added. "Some programs funded by grants will find success, but they can't be sustained without a big influx of cash. Even if it works, it's too expensive."

One initiative that was adopted districtwide starting last fall was mandatory orientation for students who are new to higher education.

Another area that will be reformed districtwide is the math curriculum.

The colleges are working to break apart developmental math courses into content "modules," so students have to take only the module they are deficient in, such as fractions, rather than an entire semester. That will require a sophisticated new placement test as well.

Creating innovative ways of teaching remedial education is difficult because financial aid is entrenched in 16-week semesters, not eight-week blocks or "mini-modules."

Chancellor Rufus Glasper said Thursday that the district might move around resources to offer the math testing and modules for free so students don't have tap into their financial aid for a short remedial class.

Improvement in development education could actually translate into more funding for the colleges.

The district is in a pilot program that is measuring various metrics, including developmental education, as a precursor to "performance funding," similar to that received by the K-12 schools for 2014-15.

Schools that receive an A grade from the state Department of Education got an additional \$21.5 million from the Legislature.

Improving basic skills

When Cameron reported to the district governing board on SCC's success with accelerated developmental classes, she noted that students who test into the lowest level might read at a first-grade level, with difficulty comprehending even the most basic sentences.

Corr said that few students at the very lowest level will ever earn a college degree, but improving their basic skills also is part of the colleges' mission.

"We try to meet folks where they're at and get them where they can be, and that's not always a college credential for all folks," he said.

"That's the challenge of community colleges. We have people who are academically gifted and can run with the big dogs at any elite university, and we have people working on basic literacy skills.

"We run the full spectrum."

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