

PRECOLLEGE (REMEDIAL) EDUCATION

A launchpad to credentials

Washington's community and technical colleges work closely with high schools to help students become ready for college. They are also fundamentally transforming their own precollege (remedial) education approaches to move students of all ages faster into credit-bearing classes.

Upgraded skills for college success

Precollege courses bring students up-to-speed in math and English language arts (reading/writing) so they can complete college, land well-paying jobs and upskill Washington's workforce.

- Statewide, 50 percent of recent high school graduates at community and technical colleges take at least one remedial course. Often called a "perishable" skill, math continues to be the area of greatest need. About 43 percent of recent high school graduates place into precollege math, 22 percent into precollege English and 15 percent into both. Those numbers are for the graduating class of 2015, college freshmen during the 2015-16 school year.¹
- Older adults, well out of high school, also need to brush up their skills. In 2015-2016, half of all precollege students in community and technical colleges were 22 years old or older. Of these students, most were 25 years old or older.²
- Precollege enrollment accounts for only eight percent of state-supported full-time equivalent students at Washington's community and technical colleges. Most instruction continues to focus on preparing students for careers or to transfer to a university.³



- Precollege education provides a critical entry-point into college for students who would otherwise be unable to earn the credits required for a certificate or degree. Forty percent of all bachelor's graduates from public four-year universities started at a community or technical college. Most (59 percent) of these transfer students took at least one precollege level class at a two-year college that made it all possible.⁴

Prevention

- **College and career readiness standards:** Most states have adopted standards that measure whether students are on-track to enter college or a career.

Here in Washington, students take "Smarter Balanced Assessments" in grades 3-8 and again in 10th grade. The assessments are given every spring. (The assessment was moved from 11th to 10th grade starting spring 2018.)

Under a landmark agreement reached by community and technical colleges and universities, 10th-graders who score at college-ready levels 3 or 4 can move directly into credit-bearing, college-level courses. This means they can bypass traditional placement tests when they enroll in college and can avoid having to take remedial courses.

Students who score lower on the assessment have a chance to catch up in 11th and 12th grades with “Bridge to College” classes. Those who earn a B or better in the classes can bypass college placement testing at community and technical colleges and Eastern Washington University. The other public universities are also exploring the bridge classes as a placement tool.

These bridge classes were developed by the community and technical college and K-12 systems. In the 2016-17 school year, more than 300 teachers in 149 high schools across Washington state taught the courses, with roughly 600 students enrolling to prepare for college success.⁵ Funding for the bridge classes is provided by College Spark Washington.

- **Other placement alternatives:** Beyond the Smarter Balanced Assessment for high school students, community and technical colleges give students of all ages other ways to show they are college-ready. These include traditional placement tests — such as COMPASS or ACCUPLACER — as well as high school transcripts, transcripts from other colleges or a student’s performance in a college-level class.

Innovation

- **Math pathways:** Colleges are avoiding the “one size fits all” approach to math. Instead, math requirements are matched to students’ academic plans. STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) majors still take the traditional math sequence, while other students can take math more aligned with their career goals.

For example, a paralegal might take quantitative reasoning or statistics. The goal is to avoid overpowering students with math expectations unrelated to their future careers or lives.

- **Competency-based education:** Colleges are condensing the number of required precollege courses and allowing students to advance once they’ve mastered the topic, rather than waiting for the course to end. This saves students time and tuition money and reduces the possibility of content repetition.
- **Filling gaps in knowledge:** Rather than requiring students to take quarter-long courses, many colleges simply target knowledge gaps so students can move ahead quickly. Self-study options and personally tailored curriculum are a few of the approaches.
- **Leveraging technology:** Colleges are using “flipped” classrooms. Students learn content online and cement their knowledge in class, where they problem-solve and practice with instructors. This allows students to get specific, personalized help and to practice what they learn.
- **Defaulting to “yes” for those on the margin:** At some colleges, students who test just below the cut-off scores for college-level courses are mainstreamed into the courses. These students get extra tutoring help or often simply catch up in class.
- **Offering I-BEST courses, or “Integrated Basic Education Skills Training”:** I-BEST pairs two instructors in the classroom — one to teach academic or job-training content, and the other to teach precollege content — so students move ahead faster.
- **Measuring precollege success in our performance-based funding model:** Our Student Achievement Initiative awards colleges points, and funding, when students reach key academic milestones. Colleges receive points after students complete the highest level of precollege classes in English and math, rather than when they complete each individual class in a sequence. This shifts the focus from the number of classes taken, to the highest level of knowledge gained. An extra point is awarded if a student completes a college-level math or English class within the same year as completing a precollege class. The goal is to close the “persistence gap.”

Sources:

1. Education Research and Data Center, 2015 High School Feedback Reports.
2. State Board for Community and Technical Colleges research staff. Email from Devin DuPree, Aug. 15, 2017.
3. SBCTC, 2016 Fall Quarter Report, Olympia.
4. State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (2013). The Role of Transfer in the Attainment of Baccalaureate Degrees at Washington’s Public Bachelor’s Degree Institutions, Class of 2011. Olympia.
5. Data from OSPI website, Aug. 15, 2017



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