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Cal State's remedial study reform now national 'wave', says head

US' biggest four-year university system reduces barriers for struggling entrants

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The outgoing head of the US' largest (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_universities_and_university_networks_by_enrollment) four-year university system is leaving with a plea for his colleagues across the nation: stop putting unnecessary hurdles in the way of struggling students.

Timothy P. White, reflecting on his eight-year spell as chancellor of the California State University system, listed his controversial decision to overhaul remedial education as one of the best moves of his tenure.

The two-year-old policy means that incoming CSU students are given more opportunities than a single test to demonstrate entry-level proficiency in mathematics and English. It then allows those students still requiring some remedial study to work on that while beginning their other regular college-level classes.

Although the programme is still in its early days, Dr White told *Times Higher Education* that he has been encouraged by initial results across CSU's 23 campuses, which collectively host 480,000 students. One key outcome: while CSU accepts more than 17,000 students each year who are considered unprepared for college-level maths, the number of those managing to pass a maths class increased from 950 in 2017 to almost 7,800 in 2018. Four-year graduation rates have also risen.



Source: Getty

That success, along with similar outcomes in a few other states that have tried similar programmes, has helped to dispel some reservations about the idea and dampen some criticisms of it since its implementation across the CSU system.

Just two years in, however, it remains to be seen whether CSU and other US colleges have found a method that will meaningfully contribute to greater long-term success rates for low-income students arriving from poorly funded school systems.

“We all know [that preparedness for college] relates so heavily (<https://www.educationnext.org/make-2019-results-nations-report-card/>) to socio-economic status and race, and we’re not talking about that,” said Michael G. Neubauer, a professor of mathematics at CSU’s Northridge campus, who welcomes Dr White’s basic idea but remains unsure about how it will eventually play out.

That concern is shared by William G. Tierney, a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-southern-california>), who has studied the new CSU policy. Professor Tierney said he supports Dr White’s general approach but sees its effects limited by shortcomings in US education prior to college.

CSU’s call for a single new comprehensive maths class to be taught at the high school level might not be enough, Professor Tierney argued in a just-completed analysis. “There is no magic bullet,” he said.

Dr White acknowledged such problems and said they were being addressed, largely from CSU’s position as the state’s top producer of primary-school teachers. But he said that overhauling CSU’s layer of remedial education – which CSU and some others prefer to call “developmental (<https://www.ecs.org/developmental-education-an-introduction-for-policymakers/>)” education – is a common-sense step that encourages students while saving them time and money.

For too many CSU students with low-income backgrounds or little family history of higher education, the previous CSU policy that made the maths and English tests a flat barrier to for-credit coursework was expensive and deflating, Dr White said.

It is hard enough for such students to get enrolled in college, he said. “And then the campus says, ‘Hey...welcome, let me slap this big “R” on your chest – you’re a remedial student,’” he said. “We want to be known for who we graduate, not who we exclude.”

Yet much of US higher education still embraces that gatekeeping role of remediation, despite accumulating evidence that it likely makes things worse.

One of the most recent analyses involves Tennessee, which in 2015 eliminated remedial classes in its colleges and relied on high schools to help bridge the gaps. That study, led by researchers at Harvard University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/harvard-university>) and published (<https://www.nber.org/papers/w26133>) in August by the National Bureau of Economic Research, credited Tennessee's programme with increasing first-year maths enrolments and with giving students an average of 4.5 additional college credits by their second year.

"There do appear to be notable improvements on student outcomes," said one co-author of the Tennessee study, Angela Boatman, an associate professor of higher education at Boston College (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-college>).

There's a lot at stake behind the question. Federal data show (<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf>) that 40 per cent of students at four-year colleges, and two-thirds of those at two-year community colleges, take at least one remedial course. Such courses cost students and their families about \$1.3 billion (£1 billion) a year, the Center for American Progress said in a 2016 report (<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2016/09/29120402/CostOfCatchingUp2-report.pdf>).

Still (<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/referral-enrollment-completion-developmental-education.html>) more studies (<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/high-stakes-placement-exams-predict.html>), from Columbia University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/columbia-university>), report that many students placed in such courses never complete them, and that such students often would have done better if they had gone straight to their college-level work.

The first element of the new CSU policy – the use of multiple measures of student readiness for English and maths – is increasingly accepted, having been adopted by systems in at least 19 states, said Christopher M. Mullin, director of Strong Start to Finish, a project of the congressionally authorised Education Commission of the States.

But four-year institutions appear slower to embrace new ways to help students with remedial needs begin their regular coursework, said Pamela Burdman, an education policy analyst at the Opportunity Institute, a social policy thinktank.

"It takes time for faculty to learn about and trust the research," which shows that expanded student support structures are more effective than remedial courses, Ms Burdman said.

Dr Boatman agreed that faculty inertia was a problem. But cost is also a major obstacle, she said. "Reforming remedial education at scale is not easy. Many of the most effective efforts are resource-intensive, requiring new technology, staff or other supports, and colleges may lack the finances."

Nevertheless, a gradual abandonment of remedial education appears inevitable, according to Dr Boatman and other experts. Some CSU faculty who were opposed to or wary of the idea have subsequently acknowledged being surprised by the degree to which students were able to handle it.

Professor Neubauer was among them, having suggested to the *Los Angeles Times* (<https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-cal-state-remedial-education-reforms-20190225-story.html>) that in essence the change amounted to just giving students college credit for work that previously was considered remedial.

Speaking to *THE*, however, he made clear that his primary reason for demurring involved the speed with which Dr White imposed the changes – which he called a “pretty close-to-impossible timeline” designed with “very little faculty input”.

Among other things, Professor Neubauer said, the changes in 2017 did little or nothing to differentiate students by majors, such as by ensuring that non-science majors with a remedial need were directed towards a different maths class than engineering students.

CSU is now working to address that, he said, “but I would have just liked to have been allowed to do that from the very beginning”.

Professor Neubauer also affirmed Dr Boatman’s findings on the cost of administration. CSU’s new system for assessing student readiness in maths and English replaces standardised tests with a variety of measures that can include high school grades, ACT and SAT scores and other data.

Professor Neubauer, who served several years as a vice-provost at CSU-Northridge, said he had watched perplexed admissions and records staff contend with the complications of allowing students to be ranked on their best possible combination of performance measures.

Dr White, who plans to step down in June, acknowledged that adoption of the changes to remedial education involved “a lot of discussion and some controversy”. But, he added, “what we’re doing is having a successful wave across America, and I think five years from now you’ll see the stand-alone remedial class [as] a dinosaur of the past.”

Dr Mullin agreed. Colleges and their faculty around the US may be moving slowly to eliminate remediation barriers, he said, but they appear to be doing that because they want to get the changes right, not because they doubt the ultimate benefit.

“I don’t see hesitation,” he said. “I see thoughtful and deliberate conversations under way.”

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