



Do Fewer Remedial Course-takers Mean Better-prepared College Students?

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It's tempting to assume that when Missouri high schools hand out diplomas, graduates are ready for postsecondary education. But far too many students are unprepared, leaving colleges the responsibility of teaching students the prior knowledge required to succeed in their coursework.

Traditionally, unprepared students have taken remedial classes, in which students learn high school-level content and don't earn credit, yet still pay tuition. The percentage of Missouri public high school graduates taking remedial courses at public universities has declined notably in recent years. In 2013, [remedial course taking](#) was at 35.6 percent when college and career readiness was at 37.2 percent; by 2017 remediation had tumbled nearly 13 points to 22.8 percent. At first glance, this is a noteworthy improvement—but what caused it?

Are students simply better prepared for college than students of a few years ago? It's unlikely. [DESE's own numbers](#) show 37.2 percent of graduates being college- or career-ready in 2013 compared to 42.5 percent in 2017. It's progress, but probably not enough to account for a much larger decline in remedial course-taking.

A more likely explanation might be a shift in the methods used by Missouri's Department of Higher Education (DHE) to help underprepared students. One of [DHE's objectives](#) is to "eliminate remedial education in favor of co-requisite models and similar proven methods." Remedial students are less likely to [finish their degree](#) within six years, setting them even further behind and potentially saddling them with student debt. Co-requisite programs help underprepared students by enrolling them in introductory, credit-bearing courses and providing support services. The support services normally include labs and tutoring to supplement the course material, but the specific services offered vary by university. Alternative forms of remediation are offered by 92 percent of public higher education institutions. The most common is co-requisite courses, but other alternative remediation offerings include modularized courses and fast-track options.

DHE only recently began collecting data on course completion rates of co-requisite students, who already show a higher college-level course passage rate than those taking traditional remedial courses. [Students in co-requisite programs](#) (page 14) were able to pass a college-level math course in their first academic year at a rate of 53.2 percent, compared to a 19.6 percent passing rate from other types of remediation. In English, 65.5 percent of co-requisite students passed a college-level English class, whereas only 35.7 percent of students enrolled in other types of remediation passed such a class within one academic year.

It's possible that these numbers overstate the advantage of corequisite courses. For example, remedial classes set students back a semester while corequisite courses are taken concurrently with the credit-bearing class—which means that the rate of completing of a college-level class *in the first academic year* might not be a fair way to compare remedial and corequisite classes. And in any case, the real test of the corequisite course model will be how likely participants are to earn their college degrees, not just pass a single college-level class.

But giving corequisites the benefit of the doubt—and giving colleges and universities due credit for finding a better way to help underprepared students—shouldn't mean overlooking the fact that Missouri still has a public school system from which fewer than half of graduates emerge unprepared for college or a career. Rather than leaving it to colleges to finish their students' high school education, shouldn't Missouri public schools take a hard look at why so many kids are graduating high school without the necessary skills to succeed in adult life?

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