

## Stuck at Square One Web Transcript

Stephen Smith: Every year millions of Americans go to college looking for a chance to improve their lives

**Smith:** I don't want to be a gate guard

**Fellner:** I look at it like I'm recycling myself

But close to half of all college students end up in remedial classes

**Gandy:** And they told it was basically material to catch me up to be ready to be in college

**Ponce:** I feel like I'm starting in kindergarten again

Most students who start in remedial classes never get a college degree

**Adams:** You've got to stick it out in developmental ed and we've got to make it so a much greater percentage of our students do that.

Over the coming hour, Stuck at Square One: The Remedial Education Trap. An APM Reports documentary from American Public Media.

**Gandy:** I was that student that everybody wanted to multiply, I would say.

This is Latasha Gandy. She's talking about when she was in high school.

**Gandy:** I went school. I put my head down in my books. I did all of my homework. I had parents that told me no matter what my only job was to go to school and get good

grades. And no matter what I was going to go to college even if I went to college to be a basket weaver. They really didn't care.

Her parents hadn't gone to college. So they were thrilled about the public high school in St. Paul, Minnesota where Latasha went. It was a school where almost every student was from a low-income family. But it promised to get all of them ready for college.

**Gandy:** I will never forget the day my mom said I was going to Arlington. She was so elated because it was a brand new building. It promised the best technology, and the newest technology and kids would be able to do web page design and they would have access to Apple computers and just the simple fact that it was brand new made my mom very excited about the opportunity for me to go there.

Latasha was in the honors program. She graduated with a GPA of 4.2 out of 5. She had some family issues at the end of high school and waited a few years for college. When she finally went to enroll at her local community college, a counselor said she had to take a placement test.

**Gandy:** And she told me everyone had to take the test. And so I didn't think anything of it, I just took the test.

When the results came back, she was told she had to take remedial courses.

**Gandy:** And you know when they said I was taking remedial courses my first question was, ‘what are those courses?’ And they told me they were basically material to catch me up to be ready to be in college. And I remember asking them, how is that possible that I’m not ready for college when I graduated with a 4.2 GPA, I took all AP classes?

But the test showed Latasha wasn’t ready. It was a huge blow. Financially, because remedial classes cost money but don’t count as credit toward a degree. And emotionally – because she started to wonder if she really belonged in college at all.

**Gandy:** And then I also went into this state of, like you know, ‘black people don’t go to college.’ That’s something that I heard very often in my childhood. Not in my home, like I said, because my parents were very adamant about me going to college. But I heard it in school, I heard it in my neighborhood, I heard it from older adults that were around me. And they were just like, “you just need to focus on getting a high school diploma and go get a job and take care of yourself.” Right? And for them that was success.

*[Music]*

From APM Reports, this is “Stuck at Square One - The Remedial Education Trap.” I’m Stephen Smith. More than 40 percent of students at public colleges and universities in the United States end up in the same situation as Latasha Gandy: they get to college and are told they first have

to take so-called remedial, or developmental, classes. And if you end up in developmental classes, your chances of getting a college degree plummet. Only one in four community college students who start in developmental education go on to complete a degree. In other words, three quarters of them don't make it.

**Adams:** You've got to succeed, you've got to get through whatever is required in that, before you can get into college in a more general way.

Peter Adams taught developmental writing for 36 years at a community college in Maryland.

**Adams:** You've got to stick it out in developmental ed and we've got to make it so that a much higher percentage of our students do that.

The problem of students not being ready for college is arguably as old as American higher education itself. In the 1630s, Harvard had to provide Latin tutors to unprepared freshmen. But it's only in the past couple of generations, as more and more people are going to college, that developmental education has gotten so big. The purpose of developmental education is to give people who didn't get a good education in high school a second chance. But there's mounting evidence that the classes themselves are a barrier, costing students time and money and actually preventing some of them from getting degrees. In the coming hour we look at what's wrong with remedial education, and what might work better to give more people a shot at

completing college. Correspondent Emily Hanford begins our story in Connecticut, where a state senator decided back in 2012 that remedial education in her state had to change.

**Administrator:** Are you here for the test today?

**Student:** I am

**Administrator:** OK

It's the week before Christmas and people who want to start college next month have come to the satellite campus of Middlesex Community College in downtown Meriden, Connecticut. They're here to take the Accuplacer, a standardized test that most community colleges use to determine if an incoming student is ready.

**Fellner:** ah, my name is Karl Fellner. I'm a returning student. I haven't been in school for 28 years.

Karl was once a college student but quit to start his own business. More recently he's been working in manufacturing, making oil well drilling tools. But he's out on disability because of a shoulder injury and he's not sure he'll ever be able to return to his old job. I ask him – when's the last time he took a math test?

**Fellner:** 1987. That long ago.

**Hanford:** Good luck!

**Fellner:** Thank you!

**Hanford:** That's about the last time I took a math test.

*(Sound of elevator)*

As I follow Karl up the elevator to the testing room I'm feeling really relieved it's not me taking this test today.

**Test Administrator:** Alright guys, so the way this is going to work today is we're going to be taking your Accuplacer...

There's not a big crowd here. Just three guys. Sitting in front of computers, taking what may be the highest stakes test of their lives.

*(Sound of door opening)*

When the test is over, Karl gets a score report. He has no idea what it means so he goes to meet with a counselor.

**Counselor:** You are?

**Fellner:** Karl Fellner

**Counselor:** Karl...

**Fellner:** Fellner

**Counselor:** Double L?

Karl only took the math portion of the Accuplacer. He already took college English, years ago. But for the business degree he wants, he'll need to pass a college math class. And --- his Accuplacer scores show he's not even close to being ready for college math. He's not surprised -- he never took Algebra in high school. If things were the way they used to be in Connecticut, he'd have to pass at least two remedial math classes before he even got to a college class. But things aren't the way the way they used to be. Because of this woman.

**Bye:** yeah, ah, Beth Bye. I'm a state senator who represents West Hartford, Farmington, Burlington and Bloomfield, Connecticut.

Beth Bye was first elected to the Connecticut senate in 2010.

**Bye:** I would say probably the driving force that brought me to the legislature was education equity.

In other words, making sure students of color and students from poor families have the same opportunities as white students and those from more affluent families. In the state senate, one of Beth Bye's first assignments was to chair the higher ed committee. So she went on a listening

tour to talk with students and faculty at the state's public colleges and universities. And remedial education kept coming up.

**Bye:** The students were saying that some of them spent two years in remedial education before they ever got to take a class.

They were taking out loans, burning through their financial aid.

**Bye:** There are a lot of people making money off these kids.

And the data showed most of them were *never* making it to entry-level college classes in the subjects they were interested in – psychology or criminal justice or health management. The reason they came to college was to learn about that stuff, but instead they were stuck in low-level math and English classes that felt like high school all over again.

**Bye:** I was really shocked when I heard that students couldn't get into entry-level classes and I would say, I don't want to be rude about the professors, but you know, there was this culture that I encountered on the campuses with faculty which was, 'these kids can't take my class, these kids can't, you don't understand how ill-prepared these kids are.' And so, it just sort of hit a nerve with me.

The reason it hit a nerve is she knew there was another way to help students become prepared for higher level academic work. The person who introduced her to this idea? Her wife.

**Wilson:** My name is Tracey Wilson. And I taught in the West Hartford Public Schools for 38 years.

Tracey Wilson taught Advanced Placement U.S. History at Conard High School. And back in the early 2000s, the school was trying this thing that's become increasingly popular at U.S. high schools. Let any student who wants to take an AP class take one. When Tracey Wilson first started teaching AP, students needed good grades and good test scores to get in to those classes.

**Wilson:** you felt like they were separated out and they were sort of the chosen ones

The students in AP classes tended to be those from more affluent, better educated families. But the new idea was this: If you want to try an AP class, go ahead. This is Steve Bassi, who teaches at Conard High School.

**Bassi:** And I think as an educator we owe it to every single one of our students to give them a chance to succeed, to give them the hope and give them the opportunity to see what an AP course is like. And to close doors, to take away those opportunities, I think goes against what quality education really is meant to be.

Allowing anyone into AP does require teachers to provide extra support to some students. But Tracey Wilson was coming home and over the dinner table she was telling her wife Beth Bye how well it was working. Students with pretty low skills – kids who could barely write a paragraph – used to be put in classes that drilled down on things like grammar and spelling. But Tracey says putting them in more advanced classes helped them learn those skills better.

**Wilson:** It was like totally based on faith that this was going to happen, but it did. I mean it really happened. And then the kids would come back the next year and they'd say, 'You know in English we had to write a thing, and because of your essays, I could just write it.'

This is what her wife, the state Senator, was thinking about when she was listening to college students tell her they had to take as many as two years of remediation before they could get to the classes they were interested in. And here's why it mattered so much to Beth Bye: the students most likely to get stuck in remediation are students of color and students from poor families. Seven in ten black students at community colleges in the United States get placed into remedial ed. More than sixty percent of Hispanic students. And two-thirds of students from low-income families. And remember – the vast majority of students who start in developmental education never get degrees. So Beth Bye introduced a bill in the Connecticut senate.

**Bye:** The bill I introduced simply said, if a kid wants to try a class that's an entry level class and you accept them to your college, they can try. That's the bill I introduced.

And she says the higher ed folks... freaked out.

**Bye:** And there was a huge, “please don’t do this,” from people I respected a great deal. Really successful community college presidents who said, “you can’t just do that.”

They said students need the help. Without remedial classes, *more* of them would fail. All the push back resulted in a compromise. A new state law that says basically three things. One, public colleges and universities in Connecticut can only offer one semester of remedial classes. No more developmental level 1, 2 and 3 before you get to a college course. Two, colleges can’t use just one standardized test score to decide who needs developmental classes. And three: if you’re one of those people who would have gone in to the lowest level remedial class because your test scores show you’re not that close to being ready for college – for you, there will be a new system of developmental education and the classes will be free. Paid for by the state. An acknowledgement, basically, that the K-12 education system let you down. Those free classes are where Karl Fellner ended up. The guy with the shoulder injury who needs a new line of work. Here’s Karl in his math class working with his teacher.

**Fellner:** umm... this table looks a little weird

**Tutor:** OK what they’re asking

**Fellner:** Oh, I’m down here. You know, there are just some days

**Tutor:** they’re just asking you to round this number to the tenths place

**Fellner:** yup

We're at an adult education center in Meriden, Connecticut. The state now funnels money to adult education providers to teach the lowest level developmental classes. Students in this class work their way through a curriculum that's supposed to help them with exactly the math they need to do better on the Accuplacer test. The teacher does some lectures, but mostly students work on their own on laptops, asking for help when they need it. At the end of each unit in the online curriculum, students take a test to see if they've mastered the material.

**Fellner:** alright so to the nearest 10,000<sup>th</sup>. So we got 1s, 10s, hundreds...

Karl just took a test on rounding whole numbers. He needed to get 80% right to move on to the next unit. And his score? 79.17%.

**Fellner:** So what did I get wrong?

He's looking at his answers and can't figure out why one of them is incorrect. I'm looking over his shoulder and notice that he accidentally typed two commas instead of one to mark the millions place in a number.

**Hanford:** 4,570,000 and you put in four comma comma 570,000

**Fellner:** That's tough. I mean I had it but I didn't ....

This is kind of frustrating because using decimals and rounding numbers is something Karl actually did all the time in his old job. He's just not used to math out of context like this. But so far, this whole going back to school thing feels pretty good.

**Fellner:** I look at it like, I'm recycling myself.

I ask him if there's anything that could get in the way of his goal of getting a college degree. He thinks about it for a moment.

**Fellner:** Yeah, losing my house. I'll be done. I'll have to quit. I'll have to regroup my whole life.

Karl tells me he's behind on his mortgage payments. The bank has been threatening foreclosure. He lives alone. His only income is his disability check, and if he pays his mortgage every month he's left with only \$150 to live on. Karl is hoping his doctor will clear him to go back to work soon. There's a real sense of urgency among Karl and many of his classmates. They need college diplomas. And if they're learning one thing in these remedial classes, it's this: they're a long way from a degree.

**Ponce:** I feel like I've um, like I'm starting kindergarten again. That's how I feel now.

This is Hector Ponce. He graduated from high school in 2002. He works at Starbucks. Says he wouldn't be in this class if it weren't free. Hector was born in Mexico but came here when he was four and went to American public schools his entire life.

**Ponce:** I went to kindergarten and all those years, like 12 years of school, I feel like I should be excellent on all this stuff. And I'm just realizing, oh my god, I don't exactly know all this stuff.

Hector partly blames himself. But he also thinks he was ignored in school. Someone should have noticed he was behind. He's grateful, though, that he's getting a second chance. He points out that in most countries, if you're not ready for college after high school, you don't get another chance.

**Ponce:** I want to do better and it's like, and even if I don't get there, it's like I don't want to give up on an opportunity that's been given me. And the outcome would be like, working for Starbucks forever. Or worse, if I don't have the knowledge to get another job, I would be, no good for society. So I don't think that's good.

*[Class sounds]*

**Teacher:** Um, alright guys, so we're going to correct the homework...

This is Hector's English class. Their homework was to identify the parts of speech in sample sentences.

**Teacher:** I'll read it out for you, number one. "During one part of his life, Picasso preferred the color blue." I'm going to start with verbs, OK? So, um, Jordan, what do you think? The verb of this sentence? What's the action taking place?

**Jordan:** during?

Jordan thinks the verb is the word "during."

**Teacher:** umm, not so much during, remember guys - and I know we haven't covered commas yet, so we're no mastered on this, but....

Most of the students in this class have diplomas from American high schools.

**Teacher:** All right, this one's a little trickier...

Some of the students got their diplomas last spring. Others got them decades ago.

**Teacher:** Nope

**Student:** Will.

**Teacher:** Will. Will find. Now remember this when you take the sentence skills test, right. They may ask you, what's the helping verb? Which would be will in this case, right? They may ask you...

The purpose of this class is to improve students' scores on the Accuplacer test because that's what will get them into a college class. That doesn't mean what they're learning here will actually prepare them for college level work. Identifying verbs is probably not something they will ever be asked to do in college. But if you *can't* identify the verb in a sentence, should you be allowed into a college class? Remember that the initial bill Senator Bye proposed said anyone who wants to take a college level class can take a college level class. A lot of professors in Connecticut thought that idea was insane.

**Brin:** The only way that would work is if we declined admission to a lot of students.

Leon Brin is a math professor at Southern Connecticut State University, a school that accepts 75% of the people who apply. This is a place where students who don't have great test scores, who didn't go to good high schools, can get a second chance. But for many of those students to have a shot at passing a college course, they need developmental classes first, says Southern political science professor Kevin Buterbaugh.

**Buterbaugh:** There are certain basic skills you have to have before you can do higher order learning. If you come into my class where we're reading abstract articles on war or

international relations and you can't read or you can't write about those things, I can't get you to learn about the material. So to some extent the skills are essential for learning the material itself. You have to have both a base of knowledge but also basic, functioning academic skills in order to participate constructively in the class.

So basically, professor Buterbaugh doesn't buy the state senator's idea that the way to help students develop skills is to put them in challenging classes. Or at least he doesn't buy it at the college level. And there's this other idea that professor Buterbaugh doesn't buy. The idea that putting students in remedial classes is one of the *reasons* they're not making it to graduation. He says they're not making it because of their low skills.

But there is research to suggest remedial classes may actually be a cause of failure for some students. One study found that students who ignored a remedial placement and enrolled directly in a college-level course were substantially more likely to pass the college class than students who went into remediation first.

And for some students, whether they make it through college has nothing to do with how prepared they are. It's more about other stuff going on in their lives.

**Fellner:** we're actually going down to the church down here, to the food bank...

I'm in the car with Karl Fellner. He's the guy out of work because of a shoulder injury. It's been a few months since I first met him. He's still taking the free developmental math class. But things are not good with his financial situation.

*(door slam)*

On Wednesdays he comes to this food bank.

**Food Bank Woman:** applesauce?

**Fellner:** please

**Food Bank Woman:** Yogurt?

**Fellner:** oh yes, thank you...

**Fellner:** I never thought in my life I was going to be in these shoes.

**Fellner:** oh, you got other kinds of chicken? OK. I like chicken. I'll take the chicken, thank you.

Karl's doctor has still not given him the OK to go back to work. And Karl's bank has started the foreclosure process. He could lose his home, the one thing he said could stop him on his quest for a college degree. He's thinking about giving up.

**Fellner:** I had a long conversation with a friend of mine who said that, doing my business degree right now made no sense.

He'd be in his mid to late 50s by the time he finished, without much relevant work experience. Would anyone hire him? And even if he could get a job, would it pay enough to cover his bills? He was making pretty good money in manufacturing.

**Fellner:** So that drew me all the way back to thinking, maybe going into a technical program.

Karl heard about a technical program from the counselor at the adult education center. Karl doesn't know whether a guy with a bad shoulder could do any of the jobs they're training people for. But he's going to check it out. Also, he's applied to a state program to try to get some help with his mortgage. He's hoping he can hold on to his house.

**Ponce:** Um, these are – from China. They're heavy.

**Anthony:** Sumo wrestler.

**Ponce:** Yes!

We're back in Hector Ponce's developmental English class. Hector's the student who was born in Mexico but went to American public schools his whole life.

**Ponce:** This is a sport again.

**Student:** Soccer

**Ponce:** that's the first word and there's another word...

Hector and his classmates are playing a word game. It's all fun and games today because this is the last week of class and students have taken their final exam. The Accuplacer test. The goal was for everyone to raise their scores on that test. But Hector's scores – in both English and math - actually went down. Hector was surprised.

**Ponce:** Can't say I've learned everything but little pieces, like, when I'm reading, it's like "oh, I remember this" and "oh, I remember that." It's helped me a little bit more to understand...

**Counselor:** Which was harder, the English part or the math part?

Hector is meeting with his counselor. They're trying to figure out why his scores went down. Hector says he had a hard time with the online curriculum because he never uses a computer. Didn't even own one until a few weeks ago when he realized he needed a computer to make it through college. That doesn't really explain why his scores would go down though. To add to the mystery, I learn this other thing about Hector when I'm talking to him later. While he's been taking these free developmental classes, he's also been taking a class at the community college. An English class.

**Ponce:** I'm actually in English 101.

English 101. That's a college-level class.

**Hanford:** How did that happen? How did you end up - I didn't realize that. How did you end up in that class?

**Ponce:** Actually, I didn't. I don't, I don't know what happened at that (laughs)

**Hanford:** You are a very curious case Hector

**Ponce:** Yeah, I know.

As far as I could piece together, Hector came to the free remedial class for help with math and just started taking the English part because he thought he was supposed to. And the way he ended up in college level English? He went to enroll at the college last summer. Probably would have been put in the lowest level remedial class but since that class no longer exists because of the Connecticut law, he was put in the college's upper level remedial class. Somehow he missed the whole free class thing at that point. And Hector did OK in that upper level remedial English class. Got a C. Good enough to get into English 101. But his scores going down on the Accuplacer test have him concerned.

**Ponce:** No, I'm a little confused. But it's like, um, I'm just nervous that I'm not going to pass the class. Or is just a C good enough to continue my college?

**Hanford:** You're concerned that they might pass you but it doesn't necessarily mean you have what you need to be successful in the rest of your college classes?

**Ponce:** Yes, that's, that's what I think.

Hector might not have the skills yet to succeed in higher level college courses. But there's research that shows using placement tests sends a lot of people to remediation who don't need to be there. Students are more likely to be put in the right class if the grades they got in high school are taken into account too. Even the College Board, the company that makes the Accuplacer, says test scores alone should not be used to determine who is college ready. The Connecticut law says colleges are not supposed to be relying on a single test score anymore, but in practice many of them still are. And for Hector, the damage is kind of done. His Accuplacer scores going down are a sign to him that maybe he doesn't belong in college, not yet anyway.

**Ponce:** I feel very, very frozen. I feel like I can't move forward. So I feel like, perhaps just stop and do it on my own, and try to learn grammar. I think that's the, um, next step for me.

He says he's going to try to teach himself, at home on his new computer. As for Karl, the guy with the shoulder injury. His Accuplacer score went up. But he's given up on the idea of a college degree. His doctor gave him the all clear to go back to work part time. Last I heard, Karl was at his old job, hoping his shoulder would hold up. And -- the state came through with help on his mortgage. So he's not losing his house.

*[Music]*

Stephen Smith: You're listening to an APM Reports documentary, "Stuck at Square One - The Remedial Education Trap." I'm Stephen Smith.

Coming up, we explore a different approach to remedial education that's proving effective for some students. And ... Emily takes the Accuplacer test to see if she'd end up in remedial classes.

**Hanford:** Testing 1, 2, 3. This is Emily. And I've just pulled into the parking lot at the Community College of Baltimore County. I'm about to go take the Accuplacer test.

Haven't taken a test in a long, long time.

*(sound of getting out of car, walking in)*

But I've decided I should try this test. More than ninety percent of community colleges in the United States use the Accuplacer or a similar test to determine whether an incoming student is ready for college level classes. You can typically get out of taking a placement test if you have high enough SAT or ACT scores. But the majority of incoming community college students didn't do well enough on those tests, or never took them. First thing I do when I get to the testing center at the Community College of Baltimore County is meet with a counselor.

**Gunes:** I'm Janice Gunes, I'm a senior academic advisor.

She tells me the test is all multiple choice. It has a sentence skills section and a reading skills section, twenty questions each. And then a math section. The math test begins with high school algebra.

**Gunes:** Polynomials, algebraic expressions, linear equations, some geometric problems, quadratics and stuff like that.

**Hanford:** yikes

**Gunes:** (laugh)

If I do well on the Algebra, I move on to a section that tests my college level math skills. If I don't do well on algebra, I get questions about arithmetic – percents, fractions, things like that. I haven't studied for this test at all, because most people don't.

**Test Administrator:** So, here's your scrap paper, you're all set up on computer number 9.

**Hanford:** OK, thank you...

Before I go in to the testing room, the women who are getting me set up tell me they've tried this test too.

**Administrator:** Truth be told we've all done it, just to see where we are.

**Hanford:** How'd you do?

**Administrator:** English and reading were good. The math.

**Administrator 2:** Well, I was a little...I just missed reading by one point. I thought it was difficult.

Wow. I hope I do well on the reading. Reading is one of the things I do for a living.

**Administrator:** Good luck!

*(Door slam)*

When I enter the testing room, about half a dozen people are already working on their tests.

You can start at any time. It's all on computer. I'm feeling kind of nervous. Here's how students I interviewed described the way they felt taking this test.

**Alisha:** I was a nervous wreck

**Ray:** I looked at it and I was like, I don't even know what I'm doing. I'm just hitting buttons.

**Dee:** and the whole entire time, you're freaking out

**Tyler:** I felt like sh\*t. (laughs)

Of course it's reasonable to be nervous about taking a test. But it's one thing to be nervous and prepared, and another to not be prepared at all. There's an entire industry devoted to helping young people get ready for the ACT and SAT, tests that can help them get in to fancy colleges.

But the majority of students who come to community colleges are from low-income households. No one is paying for them to do Accuplacer test prep.

*(door shut)*

**Hanford:** hello

**Administrator:** well hello. Ok, so I need to take the scratch...

I've finished the test. I'm pretty sure I did well on the sentence skills part. But there was a set of questions I found kind of tricky. On a couple of the reading questions, I didn't think any of the multiple choice options were very good. And on the math... I must have done decently on the high school algebra part because I clearly got kicked up to the college math section and once I got there, I was mostly guessing.

**Hanford:** OK, so here's my score report. Help me interpret it.

**Gunes:** Yep, so....

I'm back with the counselor, Janice Gunes. She tells me I did well on the English. But not perfect. A few of those tricky questions got me. And on the math? Each section of the test counts for a total of 120 points.

**Gunes:** So you had 105 on the algebra and then a 27 on the college math portion, so that put you in math 83, which is the highest developmental class that we have.

So, I'd be in remediation. I'm not really surprised. I never took math in college. I wasn't required to. I have a bachelor's degree, in English, from a selective, liberal arts college. And college math was not something that school felt I needed. And it's *not* something I've needed for the kind of math I do in my job. But if I wanted to get another degree so I could change careers – say I wanted to become a nurse or an art teacher – I would have to pass a college level math class. And first I'd have to take the developmental class. Well, actually, I wouldn't have to take the developmental class, says Gunes. Because if you already have a bachelor's degree, you're exempted from those classes. You don't even have to take the Accuplacer test.

**Hanford:** So you would just take my bachelor's degree, even though it included no math at all, and put me right in college level math?

**Gunes:** uh-huh

**Hanford:** hmm, yeah, I would struggle I bet.

I would *want* to take a remedial class first. And I could. In fact, I could take this different kind of remedial class. It would allow me to go directly into college math, but take a developmental class at the same time. This idea, to put the two classes together, was kind of born right here at the Community College of Baltimore County. Not with math, but with writing. The story takes us back to the 1980s when the English department got a new toy.

**Adams:** The college, having bought lots of computers for the math and computer science department, finally decided to buy one for English.

This is Peter Adams again. He recently retired from the Community College of Baltimore County where he taught developmental writing for 36 years. Back in the 1980s, when the English department got that computer, they had no idea what to do with it.

**Adams:** We have hundreds of students. We couldn't have them all write on one single computer. So we decided to create a database.

The English Department entered the names and placement test scores of all their incoming students. And then the grades they got in their English classes. It was really just an improved bookkeeping system. But after a few years, Peter Adams began to realize he could use this database to help him answer a question that had been troubling him for years: why wasn't he seeing more of the students he taught in developmental writing at graduation?

**Adams:** We had this database and now we could do some research with it.

He ran a report. Took the computer all night to spit out the results. Arrived in the morning to a stack of papers on the floor. And the news was depressing. More than two thirds of the students who started in developmental writing never passed English 101, never mind made it to graduation. The obvious explanation is that the students didn't have the skills to make it academically. They failed out. And some did. But the data showed that most students who took

developmental writing passed the class. And eighty-one percent of the students who went on to English 101 passed that class too. The problem is that the majority of students who started in a developmental writing class never enrolled in English 101.

**Adams:** And what we learned was most of the reason that students were not taking and passing English 101 had nothing to do with writing. It had to do with their lives. It had to do with losing their jobs or getting evicted from their apartments or their kids getting sick or they're just getting too discouraged. A lot of students would say to us, "you know. I'm not even sure that I am college material." What a terrible term, "college material." As if human beings come in two categories, those who are and those who are not.

*[Music]*

Peter Adams thought what students needed was a faster way of getting through their developmental classes, to reduce the chances that some life event would derail them. And they needed to feel like they were in college, not in some purgatory waiting to be admitted. So he started something called the Accelerated Learning Program, or ALP. To see how it works, I spent a semester visiting an ALP class at the Community College of Baltimore County.

**Mantler:** So have a good weekend, those of you who are leaving us...

This is the end of an English 101 class. There are 19 students, but only 10 of them are leaving. The rest stay for another class. Here's the first question the instructor always asks.

**Mantler:** Ok, so the first thing, did anybody have any questions from 101?

No questions yet. This is the first week of class. The students here did not score high enough on the Accuplacer to make it into regular English 101. But they were close. So they were given the option to take ALP. That means they take English 101, and also stay for this developmental class, taught by the same instructor, Elsbeth Mantler.

**Mantler:** OK, so what are three words you would use to describe the way you feel about writing?

The students have just written down some of their feelings about writing. Now they're discussing how they feel.

**Ray:** Ah, dreadful, fearful and "oh my god."

*(Class laughs)*

That pretty much sums up the way most people in this class say they feel about writing. One student says she's terrible at punctuation. Another says he's dyslexic and would have failed high school if it weren't for spellcheck. The goal of this class is to help students with the basics of grammar and spelling, but not in a skill and drill kind of way says instructor Elsbeth Mantler.

**Mantler:** Skill and drill, meaning having a workbook and working on sentence fragments is not very effective for students improving on whatever that skill is.

Skill and drill is the way most remedial classes are taught, and researchers say that may be one reason so much remedial ed is ineffective. Elsbeth Mantler used to teach that way. She says it's better to get students to write - a lot.

**Mantler:** So what we will do is we will look at a draft, I will explain what a run-on sentence is, and then we will find run-on sentences in our own writing.

*Scene: (flipping pages)* Dee: Ok, I'm interviewing you. If I can find a page.

The students in the ALP class spend a lot of their time reading each other's writing, and talking about it. Here's a student named Dee asking her classmate Alisha to self-critique the draft of a research paper she's working on. It's now a couple of months into the semester.

**Dee:** Do you feel confident with what you wrote so far?

**Alisha:** Yes, I do. I do. I got some pretty good sources. So yes.

That hesitation you heard in Alisha's voice at first? That's a history of not feeling confident about much of anything in school. Alisha Smith quit high school when she was 16. Eventually got her GED. Now she's 31, works as an armed guard for the U.S. Coast Guard. And wants to do something more with her life.

**Smith:** I want to get out of the field. I don't want to continue to be a gate guard.

But that's not the only reason she came to college. She came because she wants to be more educated. Sometimes at work she'll hear her colleagues talking about criminal justice issues. But she never joins the conversation because she's afraid someone will ask her a question she doesn't know the answer to.

**Smith:** That is the worst feeling for me, in the world. To be stuck on stupid for a second.

*(laughs)*

**Hanford:** To be stuck on stupid?

**Smith:** Yes (laughs)

*[MUSIC]*

Alisha's plan is to get a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. But first she has to get through the ALP writing class – and a developmental math class too.

*[MUSIC]*

The way that Alisha and her classmates are taking their writing class is known in the education lingo as the “the co-requisite” model. As opposed to a “pre-requisite” model where there's a strict order in which you take a lower level course and then a higher level one. When Connecticut state senator Beth Bye first proposed changes to her state's remedial ed policies, she was imagining a system of co-requisite remediation. But she says the pre-requisite model is sort of baked into the genetic code of higher education - and it makes her kind of nuts.

**Bye:** This system is so stuck on this idea that education goes A, B, C, D, E, F, G. You know, they don't have a sense that being interested in the content can make you go from A to C. It's like, “nope. We have this bar and they have to jump over this bar and if they don't, forget about 'em.”

What she's saying is that putting students into classes they're interested in is more motivating than putting them in skill and drill classes. They're more likely to acquire skills that way. The learning research largely backs her up on this one. But there's also this question – what skills do people really need to succeed in college and in their careers? One of the instructors I met in Connecticut, Jill Harris, told me a story that challenges the idea that there's a certain set of basic skills everyone needs to have. It was about a former student of hers named Sarah.

**Harris:** She was so bright. You know, just clearly so bright.

Jill says Sarah had really insightful things to say in class. And she had this certain posture.

**Harris:** Ah. It was learning forward. Like, she was going somewhere. She was going to get there. And that was the end of the story.

But Sarah had terrible grammar. And terrible spelling. This was a developmental English class at a community college, years ago. To pass the class, students had to write a final essay. Then the English department got together, read all the essays, and decided who should pass the class. Not Sarah, said the department, because of her poor grammar.

**Harris:** and I said yes, but look at the thoughts and look at how it's constructed and look at all of the rest of it.

Jill thought the system was too quick to label Sarah a failure. So she decided to fight for her. Convinced the department to let Sarah write another essay. Sarah did and the department passed her, reluctantly. After that, Jill lost track of Sarah.

**Harris:** And then years later, as it would happen, I had a surgery. And I came out from under the anesthetic and there she was, next to me, taking care of me.

Sarah was her nurse.

**Harris:** So I got to ask her, you know, how are you doing? And she was at Yale, and she was getting her master's degree.

I really wanted talk to Sarah. Jill tried for a couple of months to track her down and finally did.

The three of us arranged to meet.

*(door open)*

**Keehner:** hello, hi

**Harris:** hello

We're at Sarah Keehner's house. She's on leave from her nursing job because she just had a baby named Paige.

**Harris:** Hi Paige

*(baby sounds)*

**Keehner:** What an odd name to name your child when you don't like English, right?

*(laughs)*

We sit down and with the baby on her shoulder, Sarah tells her side of the story. It starts back in elementary school. She was put in special ed. It was a horrible experience. One of her teachers...

**Keehner:** She tried to cut my bangs once with a pair of scissors because she told me that's the reason I couldn't read.

Sarah says the special ed teachers let her get away with doing pretty much nothing in school. Sometimes she graded other kids' math papers because she was good at math. And then at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Sarah was suddenly put back in regular classes. But she'd missed out on all those years when other kids were learning the basics of writing.

**Keehner:** when I got to high school and had to take a foreign language is when I learned most of my English skills because they were talking about verbs, present participles, conjugation and I'm like, "I don't know what you call any of this stuff."

Sarah graduated from high school thinking that was it, she was done with school. Her parents hadn't gone to college. But it didn't take her long to figure out there was very little good work to be had with only a high school diploma. And that's how she ended up in Jill Harris' developmental writing class. Grateful that Jill was willing to fight for her.

**Keehner:** I'll never be able to spell. Let's face it. If you're going to hold spelling against me, forget it, I'm in trouble.

Sarah says if she had to take the Accuplacer test again, she's sure she'd be right back in developmental English. But she didn't have to take the test again. And she was able to succeed in college without good grammar and spelling skills. She graduated with honors. Went to nursing school. And got into that master's degree program at Yale. She never actually started that program, though, because she and her husband decided to start a family. Paige is baby number two.

*(baby sounds, Sarah shhshing Paige)*

What I really wanted to know from Sarah was this: are her poor spelling and grammar skills ever a problem for her at work? One of the reasons colleges make everyone pass English classes is the assumption that we all need good reading and writing skills and it's something employers demand.

**Keehner:** I feel like the place that I needed it the most was on my resume. Like when you're trying to sell yourself. That's pretty much it. I mean nurses have their own pages of abbreviations, of Latin abbreviations, things that don't even make sense to most people and that's the way that doctors communicate, and that's the way that nurses communicate.

Learning that medical language *was* hard for her. She's dyslexic. But she learned ways around it. Like in nursing school, she says she listened really carefully and took lots of notes instead of reading the textbooks. She sees the Accuplacer test and the developmental English class as hoops she had to jump through to prove she was worthy of a college degree.

[MUSIC]

There was a time when it didn't really matter that much what hoops colleges required students to jump through. Most people didn't need college diplomas. But it's harder and harder to make a decent living without at least some kind of degree or post-secondary credential. That means the question of what colleges require of people is really critical. And what's required can depend a lot on where you go to school. I'll use myself and math as an example. I went to that selective liberal arts college that didn't require me to take any math. Now I suppose you could say I'd already proved myself in math because I had high enough SAT scores to get me admitted to that selective college. But look at my Accuplacer score. I'd be in developmental math now. If I was thinking about going back to school to be an art teacher or a nurse the fact that I would

have to take at least a couple of math classes might make me think twice. But if I decided to go for a degree and the math was hard for me, I could hire a private tutor.

**Mantler:** Think about your opinion about writing on the first day of the semester.

Remember when we came in here the first day? Think about how you felt about it then and then think about how you feel now?

We're back at the Community College of Baltimore County in the ALP writing class. It's the end of the semester.

**Mantler:** Has anything changed? Alisha?

**Smith:** I just see a change within itself. When I look at that first paper, it's ridiculous.

(laughs) And when I look at my papers now...

That's Alisha Smith, the woman who works as a gate guard. She's talking about how she struggled to write a page when she started this class. Last week, she turned in a five-page research paper. She tells the class that when she sat down to write the research paper she was filled with that familiar feeling of self-doubt.

**Smith:** I'm not going to be able to do this. This is too hard. But then as I started doing it, like, I didn't even like, think, I just click, click, click. So, I'm just happy where I am now.

Alisha has an A in this class. She's also taking a criminal justice class and she has an A in that class too. She loves that class. Remember how Alisha used to be afraid to speak up in conversations with her colleagues? She's not feeling that way anymore. Because in criminal justice she's learning all kinds of relevant stuff about the Constitution and court cases.

**Smith:** And I actually have insight on those things so I can let 'em know, like, you know the Second Amendment is this or no, that didn't happen in this case, that happened. Or, you know, just different terminologies and everything. And I kind have them stumped for a minute. Like, "Oh, didn't know that." That feels great.

Alisha wasn't actually supposed to take the criminal justice class. Because of her Accuplacer scores, she was assigned to a developmental math class. Immediately hated it and wasn't doing well. So she dropped it and picked up criminal justice instead. Alisha's going to have to pass that math class though, and at least one more, to get a college degree.

*[MUSIC]*

Back in the 1980s, when Peter Adams at the Community College of Baltimore County came up with the idea of putting his writing students into a college level class and a developmental class at the same time, he really had no reason to think it would work. But it does work. Research shows students who start in ALP are twice as likely to pass English 101 as similar students who start in a traditional developmental writing class. Why does ALP work better? Part of it is the

obvious: students are getting both their developmental class and their English 101 class out of the way in the same semester, narrowing the window on the possibility of a life event knocking them off track. And even if life events do intrude as students move through subsequent semesters, the data show students who start in ALP are more likely than students who start in a traditional developmental class to make it to graduation. Peter Adams thinks it has to do with motivation and self-confidence.

**Adams:** You know what we say when they arrive and we put them in these developmental courses is, 'we think you're a terrible writer.' And then they produce terrible writing as a result. And if we challenge them to do something really challenging they rise to the occasion much more often than we expect.

There's a lot of excitement right now about the ALP model – also known as the co-requisite model if you recall. Policymakers and foundations are pushing the idea as a way fix to remedial education nationwide... based on the results from Baltimore County and from experiments in co-requisite remediation at dozens of other colleges across the country. But almost all of the research on the co-requisite approach focuses on people whose test scores show they are close to being ready for college-level classes. What about students who are way behind? The American community college system promises a second chance to *everyone* with a high school credential. When the professors in Connecticut freaked out about the idea that anyone could enroll in their classes, they were thinking about people whose test scores show they are not even close to being college ready. Remember political science professor Kevin Buterbaugh?

**Buterbaugh:** If you come into my class where we're reading abstract articles on war or international relations and you can't read or you can't write about those things, I can't get you to learn about the material.

The research literature doesn't have much to say about how to help the students who are way behind. There's evidence to suggest the skill and drill approach is not the way to go. The state of Tennessee is experimenting with the idea of putting everyone who needs remediation into co-requisite classes and there's some early evidence that it may help even those with very low test scores. But there's also some research to suggest it may be better for students who score really low on placement tests to be kept all together in some kind of stand-alone developmental class. That's what Latasha Gandy says she needed. Latasha's the student we met at the very beginning of this program. The one with the 4.2 GPA who ended up in remedial classes.

**Gandy:** When I look back at my own personal experience, when it came to my English and reading courses, I needed that remediation, because I never got it in high school.

Turns out that spiffy new high school she went to? Latasha says it did not prepare her or her classmates for college.

**Gandy:** The longest paper I remember writing was two pages.

She's grateful she wasn't put in a college-level English class right away. When she finally did get to college classes, she was shocked to find that some people were expected to write 10-page research papers in high school. Students like me who went to wealthier schools in more affluent districts.

**Gandy:** We just didn't have access to the rigor you had. We weren't expected to perform at that level.

A recent analysis of test score data nationwide shows that by sixth grade, students in the poorest school districts are already four grade levels behind students in the richest districts. The college remediation divide begins early and more often than not ends in students like Latasha Gandy giving up. But Latasha didn't give up. She got through her developmental classes – an entire year of them - and went on to complete a bachelor's degree. Now she's executive director of an education reform group that is pushing to make remedial education free. But the biggest cost for the majority of students who end up in developmental classes isn't tuition. It's the long-term cost of not getting a college degree. The system that is supposed to be helping them is more often getting in their way, says Peter Adams. And that has to change.

**Adams:** In higher education we do lots of important things. We produce astronauts and poets and dancers and computer programmers. And all that's important. But if you're focus is on the role higher education plays in democracy and trying to make this a

country of equal opportunity, of the American Dream, of closing the gap between the very rich and everybody else. If you're worried about those kinds of issues, then the most important thing we do is developmental education. And it's really crucial that we fix it.

Adams is actually concerned about all the attention right now on how ineffective developmental education is for so many students. He thinks it could backfire... policymakers see all the evidence it's not working and decide to get rid of it. There are millions of students who need help to be able to succeed in college. Instead of eliminating remedial classes, he says, colleges have to make them better.

*[MUSIC]*

**Stephen Smith:** You've been listening to "Stuck at Square One - The Remedial Education Trap."

It was produced by Emily Hanford and edited by Catherine Winter. The web editor is Dave Peters. The web producer, Andy Kruse. Research and production help from Alex Baumhardt and Lila Cherneff. Mixing by Craig Thorson. Special thanks to [Liz Lyon](#), Tom Bailey and Katie Zaback. The APM Reports team includes Ryan Katz, Suzanne Pekow, Samara Freemark, Sasha Aslanian, Ellen Guettler, Chris Worthington and me, Stephen Smith.

We have much more about this story at our web site. You can read about the research on developmental education and you can try the Accuplacer test yourself. That's APM Reports.org

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