



# At 2-Year Colleges, Students Eager but Unready

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Andrew Cutraro for The New York Times

"I feel a little bit more — I don't want to say confident — but maybe worthy." Michael Walton graduated early from high school but needed remedial math.

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO  
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DUNDALK, Md. — At first, Michael Walton, starting at community college here, was sure that there was some mistake. Having done so well in high school in West Virginia that he graduated a year and a half early, how could he need remedial math?

Eighteen and temperamental, Mickey, as everyone calls him, hounded the dean, insisting that she take another look at his placement exam. The dean stood firm. Mr. Walton's anger grew. He took the exam a second time. Same result.



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Andrew Council for The New York Times

"Students are still shocked when they're told they need developmental courses. They think they graduated from a high school, they should be ready for college." **DR. DONNA MCKUSIK, COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF BALTIMORE COUNTY**

"I flipped out big time," Mr. Walton said.

Because he had no trouble balancing his checkbook, he took himself for a math wiz. But he could barely remember the Pythagorean theorem and had trouble applying sine, cosine and tangent to figure out angles on the geometry questions.

Mr. Walton is not unusual. As the new school year begins, the nation's 1,200 community colleges are being deluged with hundreds of thousands of students unprepared for college-level work.

Though higher education is now a near-universal aspiration, researchers suggest that close to half the students who enter college need remedial courses.

The shortfalls persist despite high-profile efforts by public universities to crack down on ill-prepared students.

Since the [City University of New York](#), the largest urban public university, barred students who need remediation from attending its four-year colleges in 1999, others have followed with similar steps.

California State set an ambitious goal to cut the proportion of unprepared freshmen to 10 percent by 2007, largely by testing them as high school juniors and having them make up for deficiencies in the 12th grade.

Cal State appears nowhere close to its goal. In reading alone, nearly half the high school juniors appear unprepared for college-level work.

Aside from New York City's higher education system, at least 12 states explicitly bar state universities from providing remedial courses or take other steps like deferred admissions to steer students needing helping toward technical or community colleges.

Some students who need to catch up attend two- and four-year institutions simultaneously.

The efforts, educators say, have not cut back on the thousands of students who lack basic skills. Instead, the colleges have clustered those students in community colleges, where

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their chances of succeeding are low and where taxpayers pay a second time to bring them up to college level.

The phenomenon has educators struggling with fundamental questions about access to education, standards and equal opportunity.

Michael W. Kirst, a Stanford professor who was a co-author of a report on the gap between aspirations and college attainment, said that 73 percent of students entering community colleges hoped to earn four-year degrees, but that only 22 percent had done so after six years.

“You can get into school,” Professor Kirst said. “That’s not a problem. But you can’t succeed.”

Nearly half the 14.7 million undergraduates at two- and four-year institutions never receive degrees. The deficiencies turn up not just in math, science and engineering, areas in which a growing chorus warns of difficulties in the face of global competition, but also in the basics of reading and writing.

According to scores on the 2006 ACT college entrance exam, 21 percent of students applying to four-year institutions are ready for college-level work in all four areas tested, reading, writing, math and biology.

For many students, the outlook does not improve after college. The Pew Charitable Trusts recently found that three-quarters of community college graduates were not literate enough to handle everyday tasks like comparing viewpoints in newspaper editorials or calculating the cost of food items per ounce.

The unyielding statistics showcase a deep disconnection between what high school teachers think that their students need to know and what professors, even at two-year colleges, expect them to know.

At Cal State, the system admits only students with at least a B average in high school. Nevertheless, 37 percent of the incoming class last year needed remedial math, and 45 percent needed remedial English.

**Correction: Sept. 9, 2006**

*A front-page article last Saturday about the lack of preparation among some students applying for community college misspelled the surname of an official at the Community College of Baltimore County, who said students were shocked to learn they needed remedial courses. She is Donna McKusick, not McKusik. The article also misspelled the given name of a former talk show star, whose habit of personalizing issues on her program was likened to students in a remedial reading class who discussed a television documentary in personal terms. She is Ricki Lake, not Ricky.*

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