

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-656](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Education reported that approximately 42 percent of entering community college students were not sufficiently prepared for college-level courses and enrolled in at least one developmental education course. Researchers also estimate that fewer than 25 percent of developmental education students will complete a degree or certificate. Improving developmental education is key to increasing degree and certificate completion. Some community colleges and states are instituting various initiatives to improve the outcomes of students placed into developmental education.

GAO was asked to examine current developmental education efforts. This report addresses the following questions: (1) What strategies are selected states and community colleges using to improve developmental education for community college students; and (2) what challenges, if any, have community colleges identified while implementing these developmental education strategies? GAO conducted site visits to community colleges and state education offices in Texas, Virginia, and Washington, which were identified by experts and the literature as states initiating innovative changes in developmental education coursework. GAO interviewed Education officials, as well as stakeholders from non-profit and research organizations focused on community college issues. In addition, GAO reviewed relevant laws, regulations, and guidance.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making no recommendations in this report.

View [GAO-13-656](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or [EmreyArrasM@gao.gov](mailto:EmreyArrasM@gao.gov).

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES

### New Federal Research Center May Enhance Current Understanding of Developmental Education

## What GAO Found

States and community colleges GAO visited have implemented several strategies to improve developmental education—which is remedial coursework in math, reading, or writing for students who are assessed not to be ready for college-level classes. Many initiatives involved shortening the amount of time for developmental education and better targeting material to an individual student's needs. For example, two community colleges have implemented fast track classes that enable students to take two classes in one semester instead of in two semesters. One developmental education program in Washington places students directly into college level classes that also teach developmental education as part of the class. Community colleges are also using tools such as test preparatory classes to help students prepare for placement tests that determine if they will need to take developmental education courses. According to community college officials GAO spoke with, these classes help familiarize students with prior coursework and, in some cases, help them place directly into college level courses. Additionally, most community colleges GAO visited have worked to align their curriculum with local high schools so that graduating seniors are ready for college. Little research has been published on these developmental education initiatives and whether they are leading to successful outcomes.

Most community college officials with whom GAO spoke noted that the limited availability of research in this area is a challenge to implementing strategies to improve developmental education programs. Specifically, they noted that it is difficult to determine whether new programs are working, and to gain faculty support for unproven models of teaching. Department of Education (Education) officials confirmed that research regarding successful developmental education strategies is insufficient. In response, Education has announced the availability of grant funds for a National Research Center on Developmental Education Assessment and Instruction. The Center will focus exclusively on developmental education assessment and instruction to inform policymakers and instructors on improving student outcomes. The Center is expected to launch in 2014.

#### Limited Research Poses a Challenge to Implementing Developmental Education Strategies for Community College Officials



Source: GAO analysis of community college and stakeholder interviews.