

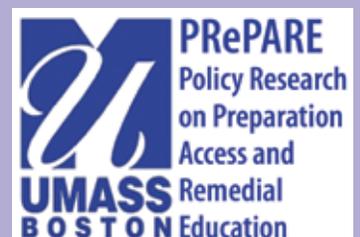
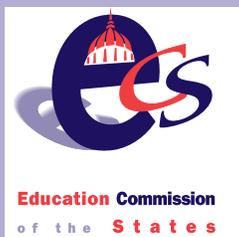
# Getting Past **Go**

Rebuilding the Remedial Education Bridge to College Success



May 2010

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## Acknowledgements

Getting Past Go was developed with support from Lumina Foundation for Education, and is a partnership of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), Knowledge in the Public Interest and Policy Research on Preparation, Access and Remedial Education (PRePARE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. For more information about this topic, please contact Bruce Vandal, Director, ECS Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development Institute, at [bvandal@ecs.org](mailto:bvandal@ecs.org) or visit the Getting Past Go Web site at: [www.gettingpastgo.org](http://www.gettingpastgo.org).

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ECS is the only nationwide, nonpartisan interstate compact devoted to education at all levels. Our core purpose is to enlighten, equip and engage key education leaders — governors, legislators, chief state school officers, higher education officials, business leaders and others — to improve education across the 50 states and U.S. territories.

## Introduction

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Every year, millions of students enroll in community colleges or four-year institutions with the goal of completing a college education. Unfortunately, many arrive on college campuses, take a college placement exam and discover they will need to complete remedial education courses in math, reading or writing before they can begin their program in earnest. For those who only need a single course, this can be a minor hurdle. Others find themselves running in place, working hard but making little progress because they fail or withdrawal from a remedial course, having to try again the next term. Many who need to take three or more courses never even get out of the starting blocks. They give up on their goal, never Getting Past Go.

Getting Past Go, which is supported through a grant from Lumina Foundation for Education, is a partnership of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), Knowledge in the Public Interest (KPI), and Policy Research on Preparation, Access and Remedial Education (PRePARE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston that is exploring how states can increase the college success of students who require remediation.

Getting Past Go will describe the current policy landscape for remedial education, explore the critical policy levers that guide the delivery of remedial education on college campuses and study how policy has either facilitated or impeded innovation in the delivery of remedial education.

The following paper outlines some initial findings from the work to date and offers a proposed framework for further study of state and system policy related to remedial education.



## Remedial Education as Symptom of System Failure

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For many policymakers, the high percentage of college students who require at least one remedial education course in reading, writing or mathematics is a symptom of the education system's failure to adequately prepare students for postsecondary education. A quick review of the data illustrates how easy it is to come to this conclusion.

National data from the U.S. Department of Education on participation in remedial education found that 34% of all new entering college students required at least one remedial education class. Of those students who enrolled in a community college, 43% required some remedial education.<sup>1</sup> While these numbers are alarming, more recent research on participation rates at the state level paint an even bleaker picture. Recent state analyses conducted by ECS reveal that many states have remediation participation rates between 30% and 40%, with some states having rates over 50%.<sup>2</sup>

High participation rates in remedial education translate to high costs for students and postsecondary institutions. An analysis done by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Strong American Schools *estimated that remedial education costs states and students up to \$2.3 billion annually.*<sup>3</sup>

Most troubling of all is that the college completion rate for students who enroll in remedial education is extremely low. According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 17% of high school graduates who require at least one remedial reading course and 27% who require a remedial math course earn a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup>

For new entering community college students, the Lumina Foundation for Education's *Achieving the Dream Initiative found that 15% of students placed into remedial education completed their remedial education sequence in one academic year, 40% partially completed their sequence and 46% did not begin their sequence.*<sup>5</sup>

High participation rates, high costs and low college completion rates are a cause for concern among policymakers. As a result, many states are cutting the costs of remedial education by: 1) reducing the need for it through more rigorous high school graduation standards and 2) reducing instruction costs by relieving four-year institutions of the responsibility of offering remedial education — shifting it primarily to community colleges where instructional costs are lower. Despite the remedial-education-as-symptom approach of many states, there is a growing consensus that it is a key solution to low college attainment rates in the United States.

## Role of Remedial Education in President Obama's College Attainment Goal

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President Obama has announced the goal for the United States to have the highest college attainment rate in the world by 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Reaching this goal will take a herculean effort. Postsecondary education will need to reach far beyond the traditional education pipeline of graduating high school seniors to underserved populations such as adults returning to education from the workforce, GED students and English language learners. In many, if not most, circumstances these students will have to complete remedial education to have any chance of earning a postsecondary credential.

According to Dennis Jones from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, the United States will need to increase postsecondary degree production by almost 53% annually — which equates to 781,000 additional degrees per year — to be number one in the world by 2025.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Jones concludes that 32 states will need to reach beyond traditional high school graduates — to adults and other nontraditional students — to increase their college attainment rates to the levels required to be number one in the world.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. Census numbers reveal that 42 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 64 are candidates for postsecondary education, but are not adequately prepared. Of those 42 million, over 8 million have a high school diploma or less and require English language instruction; 14.5 million have a high school diploma, but do not earn a livable wage and are not prepared for postsecondary education; and 19 million do not have a high school diploma or an equivalent. For this population, remedial education will need to be an essential component of any state or national strategy to increase college attainment.<sup>9</sup>

# Navigating the Remedial Education Bridge

The *Achieving the Dream* research revealing the low percentage of students who complete a remedial education sequence suggests that remedial education does not provide the strong transition into higher education that it should.

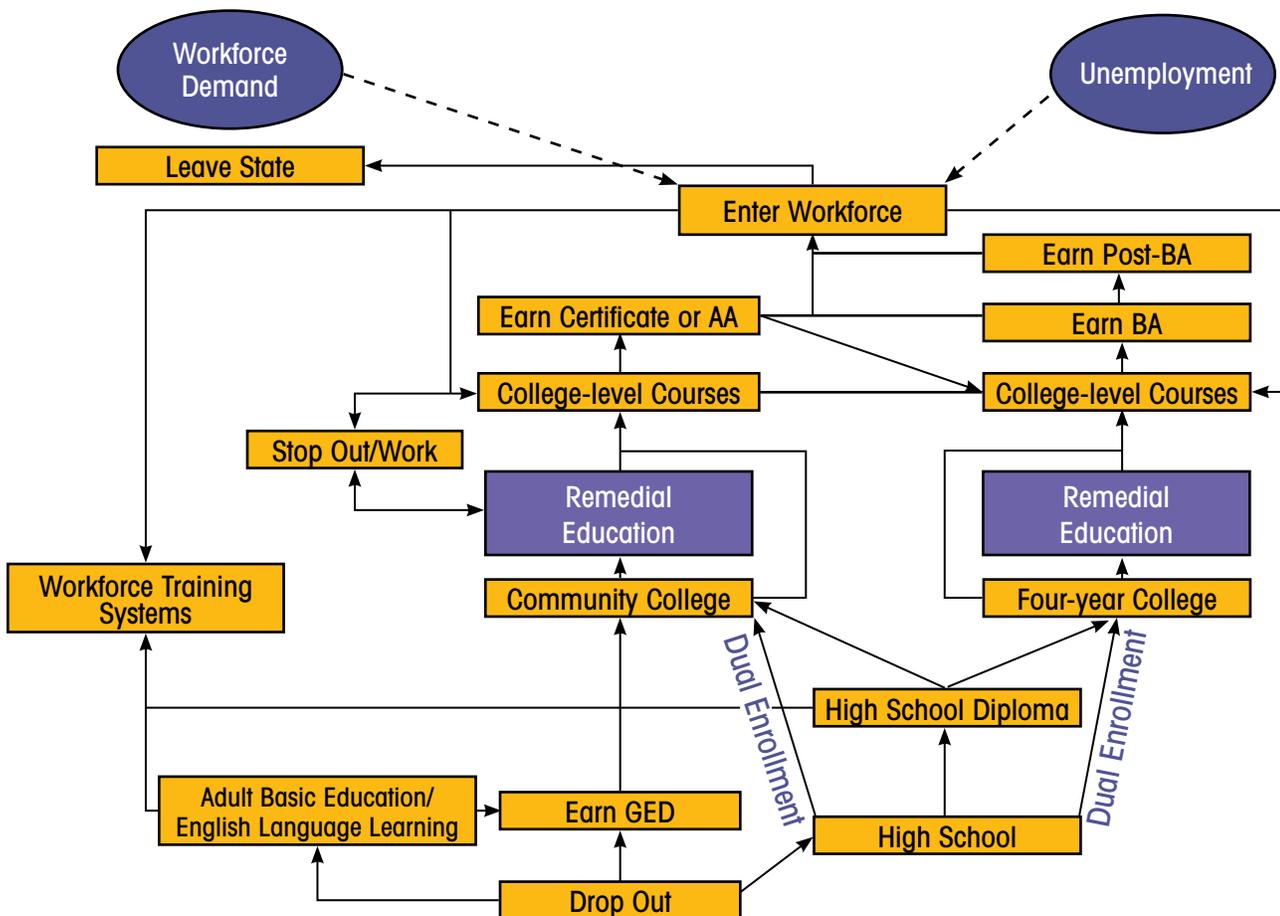
To ensure that remedial education is a strong and stable bridge to a postsecondary credential, colleges and universities will need to devise stronger policies and more customized approaches to remedial education that will enable students to quickly and efficiently move into a college program.

Unfortunately the system looks a lot like a rickety rope bridge you might find in an Indiana Jones film, treacherous and terrifying. As Figure 1 illustrates, students come from all walks of life and circumstances into postsecondary education. In addition to the traditional high school pathway, students enter from adult basic

education programs, workforce training programs and after being displaced from a job. In many cases students entering postsecondary education from one of these gateways do so without the academic skills they need to succeed. These students take an assessment exam and are placed into a one-size-fits-all remedial education course sequence that often involves multiple semesters of classes that do not meet degree requirements, delaying their entry into degree or certificate programs, draining personal bank accounts and financial aid eligibility, and ultimately their interest in pursuing a college credential. As a result, far too many students who approach the remedial education bridge choose not to even step foot on it. Others start across, lose their nerve and jump back. Only a small percent have the time and resources to make it across.

If more are to navigate the remedial education bridge, it must be strengthened and stabilized. More effective remedial education policies and practices can serve as the girders, columns and footings that are necessary to create a strong bridge to a credential. For this reason remedial education should be an important area of policy reform.

Figure 1: The Central Role of Remedial Education in Education and Workforce Training



## The Remedial Education Reform Movement

Fortunately, there is a growing movement within postsecondary education, the philanthropic community and the U.S. Department of Education that views remedial education as an essential strategy for increasing college attainment rates in states. Some recent initiatives that highlight the growing commitment to large scale reform of remedial education include:

*Achieving the Dream (ATD)*, Lumina Foundation for Education's massive initiative that works with community colleges in 22 states, has revealed the challenge that remedial education poses to state and institutional goals of increasing college attainment. As a result, ATD has identified policies and practices in their participating states that build the capacity of community colleges to increase student success.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has made a \$110 million commitment to the issue of remedial education.

Among their efforts is the *Developmental Education Initiative (DEI)*. *DEI* provided \$16.5 million in grants to 15 postsecondary institutions and six states to engage in intensive reform of their remedial education strategies.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's new *Developmental Math Initiative* will work with community colleges to tackle the specific challenge of reforming developmental math instruction.

*The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act*, which was signed by President Obama in the spring of 2010, provides some resources for community colleges to more effectively meet the needs of students who are likely to require remedial education.

All of these efforts suggest that remedial education has the potential not only to undergo a dramatic transformation at many institutions, but also to fundamentally impact the way that postsecondary education is delivered to a tremendously diverse population of students.



## Getting Past Go

The Education Commission of the States is participating in this remedial education reform movement through its *Getting Past Go (GPG) Initiative*.

In 2009, ECS, in partnership with Knowledge in the Public Interest (KPI) and PRePARE, began exploring current state and system policies, conducting a review of research on remedial education and engaging state and postsecondary system leaders to identify key policy levers that impact the delivery of remedial education on college campuses across the country. Together we will develop toolkits that will enable states to compare their policies with those of other states to determine how to more effectively align remedial education policies with state strategies to increase college attainment rates.

Following are the activities that Getting Past Go has been engaged in to achieve those goals.

### 50-State Database of State and System Remedial Studies Policies

Despite the central role that remedial education plays in postsecondary education, there is little understanding of the policies states and postsecondary systems have implemented to regulate and guide its delivery. To address this need, ECS is developing a database that will enable a closer examination of how policies impact institutional practice. In addition, the database will allow policymakers and practitioners to compare their policies to those of other states and systems. Database elements will include:

- Approved assessments and cut scores that determine placement into remedial education
- Assessment and placement requirements identifying students and prescribing remedial instruction
- Completion standards used to determine if students have addressed their academic deficiencies
- Regulations that authorize institutions to deliver remedial education
- Mechanisms for funding remedial education interventions
- Delivery strategies and interventions identified or mandated through policy
- Accountability systems, performance indicators and other policies that ensure program effectiveness
- Data collection and reporting requirements.

### Review of Research Literature on the History and Role of Remedial Education

PRePARE is examining current research on the evolving role of remediation in postsecondary education. The literature review reveals the central role remedial education has played since the 1636 founding of Harvard, through the expansion of access to higher education that took place as a result of the Morrill Act in 1862 and 1890, the GI Bill in 1944 and affirmative action in the 1960s. The review also examines how remedial education has had to justify its existence throughout long debates over access and excellence in higher education and more recently through the accountability and P-20 alignment movement. The review, to be released in 2010, will be the foundation for case study research on how state and system policies impact the delivery of remedial education.



## Engagement of State, System and Institutional Leaders

A critical element of Getting Past Go is our work with state, system and institutional leaders. To extend our reach to all states and systems, GPG is working with Knowledge in the Public Interest to coordinate a series of online dialogues or “jams” to engage remedial education leaders. In 2009, KPI held the first of several jams to identify the key policy levers state leaders believe are critical to improving the effectiveness of remedial education. In addition to the online jams, GPG convened an advisory team of remedial education leaders to create an initial working framework for the study of remedial education policies.

## Key Policy Levers for Remedial Education Policy

Through GPG’s initial analysis of its state policy database, review of the literature and engagement of state leaders, the project has identified several critical policy levers that states and systems have at their disposal to improve remedial education outcomes. Each policy lever can substantially increase the effectiveness of remedial education programs and deepen public understanding of the role they should play as part of state efforts to increase college attainment. The policy levers include:

- ⇒ Effective use of data to drive policy formation and continuous improvement
- ⇒ Assessment and placement policies that prescribe appropriate interventions for students
- ⇒ Instructional delivery that ensures students address their academic needs as effectively and efficiently as possible
- ⇒ Funding and tuition models that promote efficiency and effectiveness
- ⇒ Accountability and performance incentives that set appropriate benchmarks for measuring remedial education success and mechanisms for ensuring those benchmarks are achieved.

## Data Collection and Reporting

A key finding of the 50-state policy database is the inconsistent and limited way that data on the participation and completion of remedial courses are collected and reported. Of those states and systems that gather and report data on remedial education, most collect only participation in courses and few track student completion of remedial education sequences; student success in college-level courses; and transfer, persistence and graduation rates. Likewise, most states collect and report only on recent high school graduates who participate in remedial education, rather than the entire population who enroll. Adults and others who enter remedial education from a GED or adult basic education programs are often excluded from state and system reports.

In addition, few states track whether policies such as modifying cut scores on placement exams, limiting remedial education to community colleges or prescribing specific delivery models have successfully improved student success and graduation. Instead, states report data in a manner that leads to broad generalizations about remedial education rather than precise assessments of the effective and ineffective elements of the system.

The lack of comprehensive data provides a limited view of remedial education. As a result, policymakers often do not understand the remedial education enterprise, know who is served and whether current policies are either contributing to or solving the problem.

GPG will examine how data collection and reporting on remedial education participation, completion and other factors impact perceptions of remedial education and influence policy development. Questions to be examined include:

- ⇒ What impact do state and system reports on remedial education have on setting and evaluating policies?
- ⇒ Why does state and system data focus more on participation and less on student success factors?
- ⇒ To what extent do state and system reports shape public perception of remedial education?
- ⇒ What are the challenges to collecting and reporting more comprehensive data on remedial education?

## Assessment and Placement

The process of assessing new entering students, placing underprepared students in remedial courses and delivering instruction through non-degree credit courses is at the heart of the remedial education enterprise. In an effort to create consistency, control costs or direct improved results, systems and states have developed a diverse set of policies regulating assessment, placement and delivery of remedial instruction.

An initial review of state policies found assessment and placement policies with two different objectives: to prescribe the placement of students into specific remedial sequences or to trigger additional diagnostic assessments — empowering institutions and/or faculty to develop more customized prescriptions.

Policies authorizing the use of college placement assessments and the setting of cut scores that determine placement into remedial instruction are the primary mechanisms that drive the delivery of remedial education. A key challenge for many states is establishing an appropriate degree of consistency across institutions in the assessment and placement of students. Common assessments and placement cut scores typically are used as a means of conveying college-ready expectations to students and to

ensure a level of fairness across a system. However, it may be possible that a one-size-fits-all assessment and placement policy does not result in greater student success. It may be the case that providing some degree of institutional flexibility might promote more customized approaches that meet individual student needs. GPG will examine the goals of these policies and the extent that they either facilitate or impede innovation in the delivery of remedial education. Questions to explore include:

- Do uniform assessments, cut scores and placement policies actually improve the delivery of remedial instruction?
- Do uniform policies restrict institutions and prevent the development of more customized delivery models that meet the unique needs and educational goals of each student?
- What level of uniformity is needed to gather consistent data across institutions on the delivery and effectiveness of remedial education?
- What impact do policies that provide greater latitude to campuses on the use of assessments to prescribe placement have on the success of underprepared students?



## Program Delivery

Many state policies dictate where and how remedial education will be delivered. In some cases, these policies prescribe a uniform course structure and system for delivery of remedial education. Policies often provide broad guidelines for the use of technology and other instructional strategies for all students, while other policies trigger the implementation of alternative delivery models to serve unique populations such as high school students or adult basic education students. Identifying, categorizing and analyzing policies related to program delivery will provide a new understanding of the different approaches states take to support students who require remedial education. Given our earlier findings related to data collection and reporting, GPG also will examine whether states and systems have evaluated the impact of policies on student success. To understand the issues related to the delivery of remedial education, we will explore the following questions:

- What are the benefits and risks of highly structured state policies vs. more flexible policies regarding remedial education delivery?
  - What evidence supports the specific delivery models or strategies set by state or system policy?
  - Are there policies that may indirectly prevent innovation in instructional delivery?
  - Do policies related to the delivery of instruction represent a coherent strategy for remedial education?
  - How are institutions held accountable for implementing policies related to the delivery of remedial education?
- To what extent has the funding of remedial education either facilitated or restricted innovation in instructional delivery?
  - Can states track how funding models impact remedial education participation and success?
  - What are the pros and cons of an FTE-based funding model vs. other funding models for remedial education?

## Funding

With states reducing funding to postsecondary education, it is likely that reform of remedial education will need to happen with fewer resources. Consequently, states should ensure that financial investments in remedial education result in higher program productivity. Several states use funding models to influence the delivery of remedial education. A prominent example is the elimination or reduction of funding to four-year institutions for remedial education. Through this approach, policymakers have not forbidden the delivery of remedial education at four-year institutions, but have developed a significant disincentive for doing it in a traditional, course-based manner.

Simple full-time enrollment (FTE) or course-based reimbursement mechanisms can impact the delivery of remedial education. For example, funding remedial education at the same, lower or higher FTE rate than other college-level courses could result in subtle incentives or disincentives for students, and different approaches to how remedial education is delivered. In addition, if institutions only receive funds based on course enrollments, there may be a disincentive to consider other models of instructional delivery that may be more effective and efficient.

In some states, remedial education is funded outside the FTE structure or has a designated appropriation built within public funding of postsecondary institutions. These funds have created greater transparency and higher expectations for remedial education, resulting in mechanisms to hold institutions more accountable for performance. As we examine the funding of remedial education we will consider the following questions:

## Accountability and Performance Incentives

As states become more intentional about increasing college attainment rates in a time of limited resources, the movement to greater accountability for results and more efficient use of resources has become a focus of state policy. The setting of student success benchmarks, performance funding related to student progress on those benchmarks, the drive for creative strategies to increase postsecondary productivity and more precise articulation of the impact of higher education on state economic development goals have become areas of focus for state and system policymakers. A critical consideration for this movement is the degree to which remedial education is considered and incorporated into these large scale reforms.

Some states and systems are beginning to implement accountability systems and performance incentives to drive the successful delivery of remedial education. In some cases, these strategies are part of large scale accountability models. In other cases, these accountability mechanisms are specific to the delivery of remedial education.

As states and the nation set ambitious goals to increase college attainment rates, it will be important to examine the extent that postsecondary institutions incorporate remedial education into their state and system strategies and are held accountable for the success of remedial education students. GPG will look at current and emerging policies that hold postsecondary institutions accountable, measure institutional performance and drive continuous improvement. Questions to be examined include:

- What accountability and performance models have resulted in continuous improvement of remedial education?
- If accountability strategies have been ineffective, what has undermined their success?
- To what extent is remedial education incorporated into state and system accountability and performance systems?
- What responsibilities do four-year institutions have with regard to academically underprepared students and how can they be held accountable?

## What is Your Strategy?

Our initial examination of these policy levers reveals that many states might not have a cohesive or aligned strategy for remedial education. Many policies are developed to reduce costs, reduce the need for remedial education or shift the responsibility for remedial education to different institutions with little consideration on the overall impact a given policy will have on student success. In many cases, these policies are in conflict with one another. GPG will explore how all of the policy levers can be appropriately aligned and contribute to improvements in college attainment rates. Key questions related to the role of remedial education in state college attainment efforts include:

- Are policies working in concert with one another or are they at cross purposes?
- Do state and system initiatives to increase college attainment include success of students who require remedial education?
- Are policies that reduce costs in higher education paired with practices that facilitate student success?
- Are state enrollment reporting and funding regulations undermining efforts to develop innovative strategies that can both increase student success and cut costs?

*What is your state strategy for remedial education? We hope that over the course of the project we will be able to ask states this question and to offer some models for how states might be able to provide an answer.*

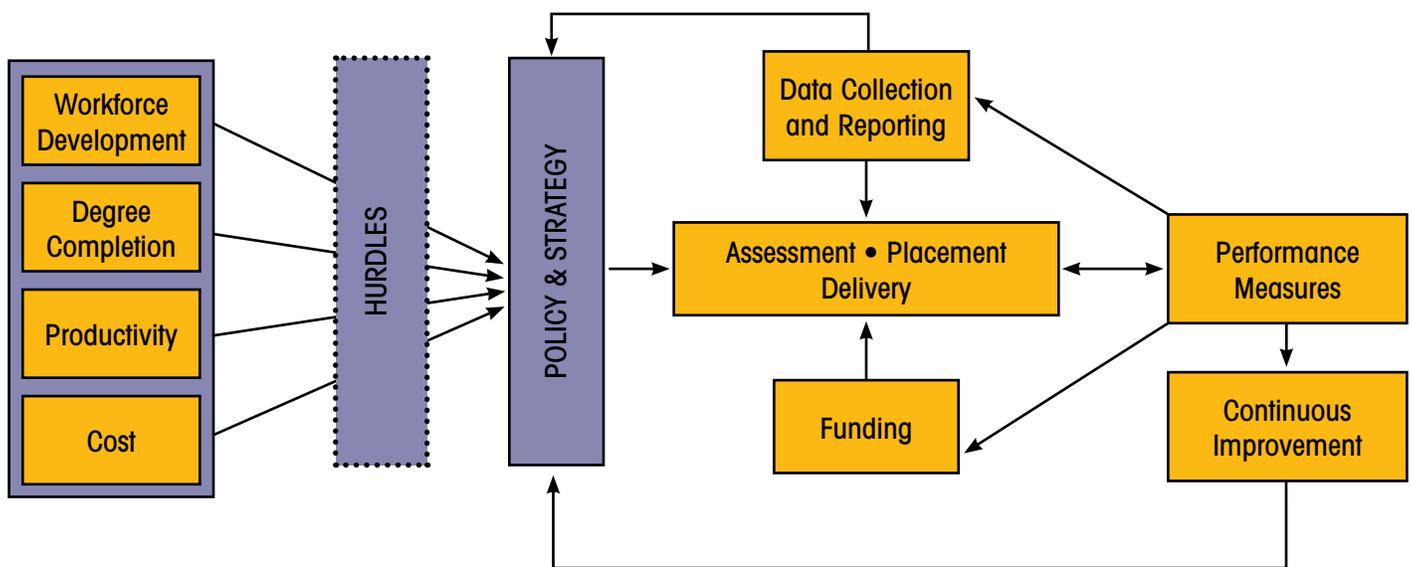


# An Emerging Policy Framework for Remedial Education

GPG has developed the following policy framework to guide our analysis. Figure 2 provides a logical model for how remedial education policy should integrate each policy lever into a cohesive state strategy. In our framework, remedial education is considered a key

strategy for addressing state and system goals related to increasing college attainment, meeting state economic goals, increasing productivity and implementing cost savings strategies. Remedial education is seen as a tool to accomplish larger state and system goals, not as a symptom of larger state or system failures.

Figure 2: Remedial Education Policy Framework



As states consider policies, it is important to examine the current financial, systemic or political hurdles that must be navigated. Once policies have been established, the framework incorporates performance systems intended to hold institutions accountable and drive continuous improvement processes.

Unfortunately, our current examination of state policies does not suggest that states and systems are employing a systems approach to remedial education. GPG will use the next year to:

- Understand the possible barriers and potential strategies for developing a more systematic approach to remedial education in states.

- Examine whether state strategies are in place to address the degree of alignment that exists among state policies. The project will also identify the barriers to developing and implementing a cohesive strategy.
- Develop toolkits for examining state policies and the current political environment and assessing the extent that policies are properly aligned to achieve state college attainment goals.

## Getting Past Go Community of Practice

Getting Past Go seeks to work with state education and policy leaders through the development of a Community of Practice (CoP). The CoP will provide leaders an opportunity to engage others from around the country on how to more effectively leverage remedial education to achieve state college attainment goals. GPG provides a wide range of opportunities to participate in the Community of Practice, including:

- An interactive policy database where remedial education leaders can compare their policies and practices to other states and systems
- Online “jams” where remedial education leaders convene for text-based conversations to examine the policy levers outlined in the framework

- Online meetings around the development of policy toolkits and models
- A “critical friends network” where policy and education leaders provide objective and unique perspectives to leaders in a given state
- A dedicated Web site that includes documentation of project developments, new policies, innovative strategies, valuable resources and current debates on remedial education: <http://www.gettingpastgo.org>
- Policy analysis and commentary on the Getting Past Go Blog.

To participate in *Getting Past Go*, contact us at [gpg@ecs.org](mailto:gpg@ecs.org) or call Project Director Bruce Vandal at 303.299.3611.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Basmat Parsad, Laurie Lewis and Bernard Greene, *Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall, 2000: Statistical Analysis Report*, National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, November, 2003.
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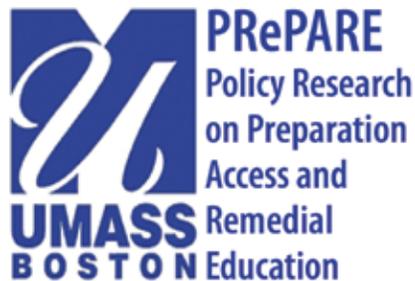




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