

Competing Principles

June 28, 2010

A governance dispute between trustees and the faculty at City College of San Francisco has everyone at the college talking about how course design can improve completion rates in remedial English and math. Now that a compromise has been reached, the institution may just be able to do something about it.

The conflict began earlier this year when a group of the college's trustees organized "equity hearings" aimed at figuring out why minority students were overrepresented in the college's remedial courses and if they were shortchanged by a sequence that did not get them "college ready" until they had completed, on average, two-and-a-half years of remedial English and a year and a half of math. The trustees argued that there must be a better way to structure the remedial track and encouraged the faculty to offer a one-year, or two-semester, track for all remedial students to get "college ready."

City College enrolls about 100,000 students. Nearly 90 percent of new students at the college start in remedial English, and about 70 percent of them start in remedial math. A college report from last year shows that only 4 percent of black students and 7 percent of Latino students who started at the lowest level of remedial English eventually made it to college-level courses. For white students who started at the same level, only 12 percent made it to college-level English.

Faculty members did not take kindly to a mandate from the trustees to make curricular changes – decisions they think, by and large, should be made by professors.

"There's been a fair amount of contention about the process here," said Karen Saginor, president of the Academic Senate and a tenured librarian at the college. "Under state law, any curricular decisions have to be made by faculty. The normal process is that the departments that are affected write proposals. In this case, a couple of trustees wrote a resolution saying that the curriculum will be like this, and that was just not really the way to do it."

Still, many faculty members are sympathetic to the argument that the remedial track, especially in English and math, takes way too long to complete, leading many students to leave college before reaching college courses. Faculty would just have preferred to bring forth concerns about it themselves.

"The really controversial aspect of this was that some individuals, including those who were not in English and math who felt the process is way too slow, went and talked to the trustees to try to move it along," Saginor said. "I grant you, the process isn't very fast, but the process has been

moving. But, you know how it is, people want to see change happen now. For some students we want to make [remediation] happen as soon as possible, but others are at the fourth or fifth grade level. It's hard to get someone through who's not yet constructing complete sentences and has shaky grammar. It takes time and effort. There's a big learning curve there."

From many trustees' perspective, however, waiting for faculty to come to a consensus on how to improve remediation would simply take too long and hurt those students already in the pipeline – hence their call to action.

"There's a tremendous amount of give and take and politics and turf battles at educational institutions," said Milton Marks, president of the Board of Trustees and one of the original sponsors of the resolution to shorten the remedial track. "Also, there's a culture at City College where people would prefer the board not do anything. Some faculty have taken this to mean that nobody should mess with them and that they can't be questioned. But as a board, we are people who are demanding a higher level of accountability than ever before. Now, for the first time that I've been involved with the college, everyone is talking about the achievement gap, when for years people didn't want to even admit it. I think that's great."

Marks, who describes himself and many of his trustee colleagues as "activist," noted that the push to speed up remediation was not a "one size fits all approach." In that view, he differs from some of his fellow trustees, who argued that the best track was also the shortest.

"We need to have more flexibility," Marks said. "You have to be nimble enough to accommodate different learning styles. I would like to see students placed into rapid remediation if that's best for them. We need to put students in the right place to enable them to succeed."

Though the conflict between trustees and faculty about the process of changing the curriculum has simmered for months, Saginor does not think it has blinded faculty to doing what is best for students. She, too, expressed her openness to letting the short-term remediation track be one of many options for students to choose from to get "college ready."

"For some students, how many semesters they have to persist is what might be discouraging them to get through, while for other students, there's simply too much to learn in one or two semesters," Saginor said. "I'm leaning in the direction of having more options. Some faculty wouldn't want to do [the rapid remediation] only, as suggested by someone from the board, and find out that it doesn't work very well. We don't want to experiment on students."

Faculty need more evidence before abandoning completely the longer-term remedial tracks, Saginor added.

Compromise between the two sides came in the form of a [proposal](#) from Don Q. Griffin, the college's chancellor, Thursday night at the latest trustee meeting. Instead of mandating that the entire remedial track in English and math be shortened to a two-semester maximum, Griffin's proposal introduces the rapid model in steps.

“Let’s take 20 percent of the program and do it this way,” Griffin said. “Then, after one year, you’ll have enough evidence to see how it’s working. Then, after two years, maybe you’ll have enough data to know what students can profit from this experience and we can convince people of the data. I do expect this rapid model will work.”

Though aware of the furor the board’s proposed changes caused among faculty at this institution, Griffin believes the dialogue has ultimately been constructive.

“Debates about the achievement gap and remediation are ones that are engaging everybody in the country,” he added.

— [David Moltz](#)

© Copyright 2010 Inside Higher Ed

To view this article online, visit

<http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2010/06/28/remediation>