

## College wake-up call: Many students find themselves in remedial classes

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EVERETT — On high school graduation day, standing in a line of classmates clad in caps and gowns, students have plenty of reasons to think they're ready for what comes next.

They made it through four years of projects and portfolios, exams and extracurriculars, credits and community service. It's time to move on to the next challenge.

Six of every 10 graduates in Snohomish County go to college, most of them to two-year community or technical colleges, **based on annual state data from 2005 to 2013**. The majority get a wake-up call on campus.

They aren't ready.

More than half of the students who graduate from high school in Snohomish County and enroll at a community college are not prepared for college-level coursework. They're sidelined into remedial classes to catch up, paying tuition and buying books for pre-college courses that don't count toward their degree.

School officials are looking to close the gap between what is expected of high school graduates versus college freshmen. New classes, placement options and college prep programs are being rolled out. It likely will take several more years before the results of those efforts can be tracked in state data.

The work goes beyond courses and programs. Administrators and teachers describe a changing mindset.

At the high school level, educators are learning to look at graduation as a stop along the road for students rather than their final destination.

“Our focus for many years was on-time graduation,” said Becky Ballbach, director of **student support services for Everett Public Schools**. “We've decided that walking across the stage is not enough. We need to help them go on to the next step.”

At local community colleges, the focus is shifting from upping enrollment numbers to upping completion numbers for degree and certificate programs. That means finding students' strengths early on, said Dusty Brannan, an instructor **at Edmonds Community College** and head of the high school completion department. It's no longer “a one-size-fits-all approach,” he said.

For thousands of college students, the goal remains the same: power through lower level coursework and get to the classes they need for a degree. The challenge is doing so before they lose momentum trying to hurdle the rift between high school graduation and college readiness.

### **The cost of catching up**

Statewide, 54 percent of high school graduates who go on to a two-year college take at least one remedial course, [according to the state Education Research and Data Center](#). About 47 percent place into pre-college math, 24 percent into pre-college English and 17 percent into both. Those numbers are for the graduating class of 2013, college freshmen during the 2013-14 school year.

Snohomish County numbers are, overall, slightly lower than statewide rates, though it varies by district and subject.

Edmonds and Mukilteo schools had the highest percentages of graduates in remedial courses, nearing 60 percent. Northshore and Snohomish had the lowest rates among large districts, both below 50 percent. For smaller districts, ranges were reported to protect student privacy. Lakewood had the lowest at 35 to 39 percent and Lake Stevens the highest at 50 to 54 percent.

At Everett Community College, the busiest pre-college courses are algebra and writing. More than 1,600 new students took remedial courses there in 2014-15, half of them 18 to 20 years old.

Taking pre-college courses after high school is not uncommon, but it is pricey. A full-time, in-state student with a five-credit class at Everett Community College pays \$254.50 for that course. A part-time student pays \$513.75. Some have to take three remedial classes to reach college level, which could total more than \$1,500 for part-time or \$760 for full-time students. That doesn't include textbooks, supplies or fees, which can add hundreds of dollars more.

Despite the cost, remedial classes don't count toward a degree.

Lexy Bishop, 18, graduated from [Arlington High School](#) this spring and tested into pre-college math at Everett Community College. It was frustrating, but Bishop wasn't surprised. She never felt like she fully grasped math in high school.

“In my math classes, it was just about the push to graduate,” she said. “I feel like in high school everything is a little more rushed, so you don't go as deep into some of the stuff that's maybe more important.”

Jessa Garland, 18, graduated from **Lakewood High School** and took the same math class as Bishop this summer. She also described the placement as disappointing but it's what she expected.

“The biggest challenge was trying to remember a lot of fundamentals,” she said. “And on top of that there were a lot of things that felt really fundamental that I don't think we even went over in high school.”

Michael Nevins taught Garland and Bishop's summer class. His specialty is developmental math.

Students come in with baggage, he said. They often treat placing into lower-level classes like a failure. He's seen a lot of them give up. People get discouraged “all the time” by the long road to a degree, made longer by remedial courses, he said.

Remediation is a “bridge to nowhere,” according to a **2012 report from the nonprofit Complete College America**.

Nationally, fewer than 1 in 10 students who start in remedial classes graduate from community college within three years, according to the report, which looked at data from 2002 to 2006. Washington's numbers were better but still unsettling: one in five students who start in remedial classes earn a certificate within two years or a degree within three.

“As people move through the developmental levels, we lose more and more each course,” said Katie Jensen, dean of **transitional studies at Everett Community College**. “I worry about those people who eliminate themselves from the college student pool and they could have gone on and done something great.”

Students equate struggling in class to a lack of intelligence, Nevins said, but it's often a lack of patience or persistence.

The root of the problem is easy to sum up but hard to solve, he said. Students need to learn how to learn. The foundation for any class or job is perseverance, independence, curiosity and patience.

“I fundamentally believe that's my job,” Nevins said. “I need to help them be better students. Sure, I can teach math, but lots of people can do that. It doesn't really move the needle.”

### **Bridging the gap**

Al Friedman, dean of math and science at Everett Community College, has been working on new programs over the last few years to close the widest chasm from high school to college: math.

His department whittled down the time it takes to go from the lowest level of math placement to college classes from five quarters to three. Five years ago, they had to teach more remedial than college math, Friedman said. The balance has shifted the other way.

There have been four key changes. The first is a new math lab that combines computers and professors so students can work at their own pace but get help when they need it. The second is a revamped algebra class that focuses on study skills as well as math. Teaching more “soft skills” — patience, determination and adaptability — throughout the curriculum is No. 3 on Friedman's list. The fourth item is combining high school review with college concepts in accelerated courses.

Edmonds Community College has piloted accelerated classes, too. They're intensive and take more time but can be worth credit. Edmonds also rolled pre-college English work into college-level courses in other topics, a successful new program that's set to continue, said instructor Lisa Schubert, head of **the college's Bridge program**. Last year, students in a humanities course could try for English credit based on the quality of written assignments.

The college and **the Edmonds School District** launched a summer bootcamp this year. Sixteen sophomores and juniors spent four weeks on campus honing reading and writing skills and exploring career options.

Local colleges also are rethinking their placement systems. Teachers worry a number of students get misplaced by tests.

“A quarter is 10 weeks and a test is an hour,” Schubert said.

Edmonds School District administrators believe incorrect placements are to blame for high remediation rates, district spokeswoman DJ Jakala said. They want more options for evaluating students. Edmonds high schools also are offering more **College in the High School** and **Advanced Placement** classes so students can get familiar with college-level work.

In Everett high schools, sophomores and juniors take Everett Community College's math placement test to see where they stand. The high school and college math departments also aligned their curriculums so students can place in college based on high school grades. A similar plan was drafted for English this spring.

Half the battle is getting the right people together to talk. Officials from high schools and nearby colleges have started meeting several times a year to become “a more seamless pipeline” for students, Jensen said.

Historically, high schools and colleges focused on their own expectations while legislators handed down statewide regulations.

Students can be considered “proficient” by the state without being ready for college, said Dick Sander, STEM coordinator for Everett Public Schools. That's why communication is critical: it keeps high schools teaching workforce and college skills, not just to meet state standards.

Remedial classes in the past have retraced high school lessons. In recent years, there's been a push for faster-paced programs, hands-on learning and specialized classes.

“I don't think students come to college to learn to read or do a specific math problem,” Brannan said. “They come to learn skills and have a better chance at making a living wage.”

There also should be a consistent message, starting at a young age, that moving on to some form of higher education or job training is possible for anyone, he said.

The percentage of high schoolers who aren't ready for college when they graduate is striking, but he suspects what it really shows is how many students fall behind through the years. Between high school and college is where the holes in the system are most visible.

“But the gap that we're talking about is something that starts early on,” Brannan said. “It just gets wider over time.”

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### **Pre-college course work**

Percentage of students in the class of 2013 who enrolled in pre-college courses, by school district. For student privacy, some districts report a range of percentages — or no data at all.

**Arlington:** 45%-49%

**Darrington:** Undisclosed

**Edmonds:** 57%

**Everett:** 56%

**Granite Falls:** 45%-49%

**Lake Stevens:** 50%-54%

**Lakewood:** 35%-39%

**Marysville:** 50%

**Monroe:** 45%-49%

**Mukilteo:** 58%

**Northshore:** 46%

**Snohomish:** 47%

**Stanwood:** 45%-49%

**Sultan:** Undisclosed

**Statewide:** 54%

*Source: State Education Research and Data Center*