A Test of College Remediation Effects in Texas

Martorell & McFarlin (M&M) recently analyzed data from the Texas public K-12 and public postsecondary system and data from the Texas unemployment insurance system in an effort to quantify the benefits of public postsecondary remedial coursework. They make the following points, among others:

1. “We find little evidence that remediation improves student outcomes. In fact, some of our results suggest a small negative effect on the number of academic credits attempted and the likelihood of completing at least one year of college. The estimated effects on degree completion, labor market earnings, and the likelihood of transferring up to a four-year college are generally small in magnitude and statistically insignificant…” [p. 452]

2. “These results…suggest that marginal students in Texas receive little benefit from remediation, despite the large financial cost of the program. Second, our findings imply that the passing cutoff is not set at the appropriate level, although we cannot conclude whether it is set too high or too low…Finally, they suggest that remediation is an important example of a second-chance later-life intervention that does not improve marketable human capital…” [pp. 452-453]

3. “…our research design focuses on students at the margin for placement into remediation…Our findings also pertain only to students whose participation in remediation is affected by passing or failing the placement exam. This group is highly relevant for policy, but the effects of remediation could be different for students who, for example, seek out remediation regardless of their placement exam scores. Finally, we also examine only a single state (although one that is large and diverse), and remediation might have beneficial effects in states with different student characteristics or remedial policies…” [p.453]

4. “Isolating the causal impact of remediation is difficult since students participate in developmental education precisely because their academic skills are weak. We therefore use a fuzzy regression discontinuity approach…” [pp. 440-441]

The study used data for Texas public postsecondary students (more the 250 thousand two-year college students and almost 200 thousand four-year college students) who had valid placement exam scores in all three subject areas (math, reading, and writing). The study’s longitudinal data set contained student-level records of entering freshmen from the academic years of 1991-92 through 1999-2000.

Paco Martorell (RAND) and Isaac McFarlin, Jr.(University of Michigan and University of Texas at Dallas) provide details in an article (“Help or Hindrance? The Effects of College Remediation on Academic and Labor Market Outcomes ”) published in the peer-reviewed The Review of Economics and Statistics (May 2011, Vol. 93, No.2, pp. 436-454). Readers with a background in quantitative social research will find the content and style of the paper accessible.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at: http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/ResearchandPlanning/AbstractsofResearch/tabid/298/Default.aspx

[Abstract by Willard Horn, Director of Research, Analysis & Accountability, Chancellor’s Office, California Community Colleges, 12/28/2011]