More College Students May Need Remedial Help This Fall. Can They Get It Online?

By Katherine Mangan  |  APRIL 22, 2020

When classes were forced online amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Pam MacDonald had to scramble along with her students to find a decent internet connection in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains.

MacDonald, who teaches at Northwest-Shoals Community College in Muscle Shoals, Ala., has settled into a new routine. Every Monday and Wednesday, she drives her family’s 29-foot travel trailer 11 miles each way to the parking lot of a neighboring town’s library, which has boosted its signal for those without Wi-Fi. Propped up on the bed by pillows, her laptop resting on a folding lap desk, she turns on her camera and greets her English 101 students. Fifteen minutes into the class, she mutes her microphone as the 4 o’clock train rumbles along the adjacent tracks, close enough that it causes the RV to sway.

Jeronimo Nisa for The Chronicle

Pam MacDonald tries a video connection with one of her students as her dog, Lola, keeps watch.
MacDonald’s 16- and-19-year-old kids jockey for position at the motor home’s kitchen table, and the one who loses out nudges the family’s hound mix, Lola, aside to make room on the couch. They’ll use the Wi-Fi from the Falkville Public Library to work on their high school and college assignments.

As an adjunct who has worked for years with students needing remedial help, MacDonald is familiar with the mantra that instructors should “meet students where they are.” But over the past several weeks, that phrase has taken on a literal meaning for developmental-education instructors as students who used to
congregate in a college classroom may now be scattered across hundreds of miles. They’re finishing their lessons on breaks from their grocery-store shifts, between home-schooling lessons in cramped apartments, and in unreliable cars parked outside public buildings.

That’s if they’re finishing them at all. Many students who are worried about making next month’s rent or who, like MacDonald, lack reliable internet access, have simply dropped off the radar. More than a dozen remedial educators told The Chronicle they are seeing fewer faces pop up on their Zoom screens in recent weeks.

With students across the country shifting to emergency online instruction for up to six weeks of their spring semesters, many educators predict that even more will start this fall unprepared for college-level work and needing the kind of personalized support MacDonald is providing her class of 11 English 101 students. Which begs the question: How can that be done at scale in a virtual environment for students who, studies have shown, are more likely to struggle when instruction is completely online?

**A Shared Struggle**

According to the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, low-income and first-generation students are more likely than their peers to be placed in remedial classes, where many benefit from the face-to-face connections they make with classmates and instructors. And a 2013 study by Columbia University’s Community College Research Center showed failure and withdrawal rates were significantly higher when remedial classes moved online in two states.

Even though online support has improved since that study was published, the shift to virtual learning has many educators worried that the current crisis will leave already disadvantaged students even further behind.
Still, for those who have made the transition, the shared struggle to navigate new technology and juggle hectic schedules has brought some students and faculty members closer together.

“When Ms. MacDonald told us about driving her motorhome to the library because she lives in the sticks, that really struck me,” said Chris Boatwright, a 33-year-old aspiring teacher who is helping his pastor paint houses while his substitute-teaching jobs are on hold. “She said it’s going to be a push for me, but we’re going to figure it out together.”

Boatwright, a father of 8- and 5-year-old sons, is one of five students who meet with MacDonald separately during the week for supplemental instruction. Pairing a credit-based, college-level course with this kind of support class is a form of corequisite remediation gaining traction around the country as a way to keep students moving ahead while simultaneously brushing up their academic skills.

Boatwright said that in high school, he cared more about football than academics and that he particularly dreaded English classes.

“I talk like a country redneck, and I don’t always use proper English,” he said. But when he decided, in his 30s, to pursue a degree in elementary education, MacDonald’s English class, with its supplementary support, became his favorite. He has a 97 average, he said, and is inspired by his instructor’s example. He plans on being the first in his family to earn a bachelor’s degree, and hopes to teach children and coach football.

“With her being so down to earth and understanding, it motivates me to work hard and to be the kind of teacher who will be reachable for any student,” he said.
MacDonald is helping another student in her corequisite class get ahead now so the student can ease up her studies when the job she was laid off from reopens. Another student without reliable internet texts her assignments to MacDonald using a cellphone app called Genius that converts photos to PDF files.

All of this requires extra flexibility from MacDonald, who also teaches high-school and dual-credit English classes. “I’m way more available than I was before,” she said. “I’ve given my cellphone number out to students, which I never did before. They’re respectful of my time, though.” Her students know that for several hours in the evenings, she isn’t plugged in when she’s caring for her mother, who has dementia.

She, in turn, respects their limitations. When a student can’t make a class or needs individualized sessions to catch up on missed work, she’s just grateful they’re sticking with her. Three students disappeared after the class moved online, and no amount of calling, texting, or “Facebook stalking” could locate them.

Those who remain “have proven that they’re dedicated,” she said. “I’d be the biggest jerk if I couldn’t understand that this person has to do what he needs to to make sure his family is taken care of.”

‘Pass Rates Plummet’

Kathy Stein, a professor of English at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Tex., knows what it’s like to try to reach students dispersed over a large, rural community with limited technology.

“We think of ourselves as a 24/7 connected world, and we’re finding that’s more of a fallacy than we’d thought,” said Stein, who heads Sul Ross’s Academic Center for Excellence. “I’m so impressed and proud with how my dev-ed faculty have
stepped up to serve our students’ needs. But we have students who are lost because they’re in a snail-mail world, and we’re trying to teach in an internet context.”

This semester, she said, has been frustrating. “It takes being there and whispering in their ear, saying, You can do this. It’s hard to do that when you don’t know where they are.”

Denise Lujan, who directs the developmental-math program at the University of Texas at El Paso, shares those concerns. “We have tried putting people online, and our pass rates plummet,” said Lugan, the president of the National Organization for Student Success (formerly known as the National Association For Developmental Education).

In addition to their many life stressors, students enrolled in developmental education are more likely than other students, she said, to struggle with “poor time management, inability to prioritize, lack of focus, and an unrealistic expectation of how long it will take to understand the material.” Her other concern with online classes, she said, is ensuring that students aren’t having someone else do the work for them.
Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle’s* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Harvard Bows to Pressure From Trump to Forgo Coronavirus Relief Money
- How to Recognize the Warning Signs of a Death Spiral — and How Colleges Can Avoid One
- How to Ace the Virtual Interview

Assuming social-distancing rules continue to prevent colleges from offering placement tests, more students will likely enroll directly in college-level classes, possibly with corequisite support, Lujan said. Many colleges had already been shifting toward relying less on placement tests and more on measures like high-school grade point averages and grades in core subjects. But even those may be incomplete or marked with an asterisk given pass-fail options and truncated spring semesters. As a result, faculty members may be starting the fall semester with more questions about student preparation, and less information to go on.

Not knowing how many students will need extra help, colleges may be deciding just before classes start how many adjunct professors they need to hire to teach remedial courses. Those part-time instructors, who teach the bulk of such courses on many campuses, typically receive less professional development support than full-time professors.
This spring, “faculty who haven’t been trained in teaching online classes are having to figure it out at the last minute,” said Patti Levine Brown, an assistant professor of leadership and educational studies at Appalachian State University. “If they’re underprepared and they’re teaching underprepared students, that’s an issue that will affect our populations.”

At least, that’s one thing that everyone has in common these days.

“This Covid situation has created a situation where no one is prepared,” said Desmond Lewis, who chairs the integrated reading and writing department at Houston Community College.

“Now, everyone knows what that feels like, and we’re having to pay much closer attention to the support students need to succeed.”

That support can be especially hard for students in developmental education to come by, according to Christopher M. Mullin, who directs Strong Start to Finish, a network supported by the Education Commission of the States. “For all students, a space to learn, time to learn, and a conducive learning environment must be coupled with access to the internet, a computer, and requisite supplies,” he wrote in an email.

**Adjusting Expectations**

Katie Hern, an English instructor at Skyline College, co-founded the California Acceleration Project, which supports corequisite approaches as a way to improve remediation. She’s also worried about the online shift.

One of her students is the only person in her household earning income after her relatives were laid off. Another “disappeared for a while” when he was kicked out of his home after a conflict with his parents. An older student who’d always
thought college wasn’t for him bonded with his classmates and was getting good grades until the class went online, Hern said. Depressed and overwhelmed by the technology demands, “He’s now not even responding to email.”

Only 12 of the 21 students enrolled in her corequisite class took the midterm when it was initially scheduled. “There’s something about coming to class twice a week that creates structure that holds them accountable,” Hern said. “They have to turn in that paper physically, and they have a relationship with me and don’t want to disappoint me.”

Meeting the needs of underprepared students has always been difficult, but “the challenges the spring poses are larger and more global,” she said. “Everyone is going through this, as opposed to a few students we can label as underprepared. Everyone’s schooling has been interrupted, and we’re going to have to be compassionate and adjust our expectations.”

*Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter @KatherineMangan, or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.*

*As the coronavirus crisis deepens, The Chronicle is providing free access to our breaking-news updates on its impact on higher education. It’s your support that makes our work possible. Please consider subscribing today.*

*This article is part of:*  
Coronavirus Hits Campus

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037