

## 4 At 2-Year Colleges, Students Eager but Unready



Andrew Cutraro for The New York Times

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7 "I feel a little bit more — I don't want to say confident — but maybe worthy."  
8 Michael Walton graduated early from high school but needed remedial math.

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10 By [DIANA JEAN SCHEMO](#)  
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12 DUNDALK, Md. — At first, Michael Walton, starting at community college here, was sure  
13 that there was some mistake. Having done so well in high school in West Virginia that he  
14 graduated a year and a half early, how could he need remedial math?



15  
16 Andrew Council for The New York Times

17 "Students are still shocked when they're told  
18 they need developmental courses. They think  
19 they graduated from a high **school, they**  
20 **should be ready for college."** DR. DONNA  
21 MCKUSIK, COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF  
22 BALTIMORE COUNTY

23 Eighteen and temperamental, Mickey, as everyone calls him, hounded the dean,  
24 insisting that she take another look at his placement exam. The dean stood firm. Mr.  
25 Walton's anger grew. He took the exam a second time. Same result.

26 "I flipped out big time," Mr. Walton said.

27 Because he had no trouble balancing his checkbook, he took himself for a math wiz. But  
28 he could barely remember the Pythagorean theorem and had trouble applying sine,  
29 cosine and tangent to figure out angles on the geometry questions.

30 Mr. Walton is not unusual. As the new school year begins, the nation's 1,200 community  
31 colleges are being deluged with hundreds of thousands of students unprepared for  
32 college-level work.

33 Though higher education is now a near-universal aspiration, researchers suggest that  
34 close to half the students who enter college need remedial courses.

35 The shortfalls persist despite high-profile efforts by public universities to crack down on  
36 ill-prepared students.

37 Since the [City University of New York](#), the largest urban public university, barred  
38 students who need remediation from attending its four-year colleges in 1999, others  
39 have followed with similar steps.

40 California State set an ambitious goal to cut the proportion of unprepared freshmen to  
41 10 percent by 2007, largely by testing them as high school juniors and having them  
42 make up for deficiencies in the 12th grade.

43 Cal State appears nowhere close to its goal. In reading alone, nearly half the high school  
44 juniors appear unprepared for college-level work.

45 Aside from New York City's higher education system, at least 12 states explicitly bar  
46 state universities from providing remedial courses or take other steps like deferred  
47 admissions to steer students needing helping toward technical or community colleges.

48 Some students who need to catch up attend two- and four-year institutions  
49 simultaneously.

50 The efforts, educators say, have not cut back on the thousands of students who lack  
51 basic skills. Instead, the colleges have clustered those students in community colleges,  
52 where their chances of succeeding are low and where taxpayers pay a second time to  
53 bring them up to college level.

54 The phenomenon has educators struggling with fundamental questions about access to  
55 education, standards and equal opportunity.

56 Michael W. Kirst, a Stanford professor who was a co-author of a report on the gap  
57 between aspirations and college attainment, said that 73 percent of students entering  
58 community colleges hoped to earn four-year degrees, but that only 22 percent had done  
59 so after six years.

60 “You can get into school,” Professor Kirst said. “That’s not a problem. But you can’t  
61 succeed.”

62 Nearly half the 14.7 million undergraduates at two- and four-year institutions never  
63 receive degrees. The deficiencies turn up not just in math, science and engineering,  
64 areas in which a growing chorus warns of difficulties in the face of global competition,  
65 but also in the basics of reading and writing.

66 According to scores on the 2006 ACT college entrance exam, 21 percent of students  
67 applying to four-year institutions are ready for college-level work in all four areas tested,  
68 reading, writing, math and biology.

69 For many students, the outlook does not improve after college. The Pew Charitable  
70 Trusts recently found that three-quarters of community college graduates were not  
71 literate enough to handle everyday tasks like comparing viewpoints in newspaper  
72 editorials or calculating the cost of food items per ounce.

73 The unyielding statistics showcase a deep disconnection between what high school  
74 teachers think that their students need to know and what professors, even at two-year  
75 colleges, expect them to know.

76 At Cal State, the system admits only students with at least a B average in high school.  
77 Nevertheless, 37 percent of the incoming class last year needed remedial math, and 45  
78 percent needed remedial English.

79 “Students are still shocked when they’re told they need developmental courses,” said  
80 Donna McKusik, the senior director of developmental, or remedial, education at the  
81 Community College of Baltimore County. “They think they graduated from a high  
82 school, they should be ready for college.”

83 Across the nation, federal and state education officials are pressing for a K-16 vision of  
84 education that runs from kindergarten through college graduation. Such an approach,  
85 they say, would help high schools better prepare students for college.

86 In Florida, Gov. [Jeb Bush](#) appointed a Board of Regents to oversee education at all  
87 public institutions, from elementary through bachelor's programs. At Cal State,  
88 professors are advising 12th-grade teachers on preparing students to succeed in college.

### 89 **Starting at a Deficit**

90 As the debate rages, nearly half of all students seeking degrees begin their journeys at  
91 community colleges much like the Dundalk campus of the Community College of  
92 Baltimore County, two-story no-frills buildings named by letters, not benefactors or  
93 grateful alumni. The college's interim vice chancellor for learning and developmental  
94 education, Alvin Starr, said he saw students who passed through high school never  
95 having read a book cover to cover.

96 "They've listened in class, taken notes and taken the test off of that," Dr. Starr said.

97 Though remedial needs are high, Dr. Starr said, the courses offer something invaluable,  
98 the chance to overcome basic deficiencies in reading, writing or math.

99 "You have to figure the cost to society on the other side if you don't educate these  
100 students," he said.

101 Most of the students expect the transition to community college to be seamless. But the  
102 first, and sometimes last, stop for many are remedial math classes.

103 "It's the math that's killing us," Dr. McKusik said.

104 The sheer numbers of enrollees like Mr. Walton who have to take make-up math is  
105 overwhelming, with 8,000 last year among the nearly 30,000 degree-seeking students  
106 systemwide. Not all those students come directly from high school. Many have taken off  
107 a few years and may have forgotten what they learned, Dr. McKusik said.

108 More than one in four remedial students work on elementary and middle school  
109 arithmetic. Math is where students often lose confidence and give up.

110 “It brings up a lot of emotional stuff for them,” Dr. McKusik said.

111 She told of 20 students who had just burst into tears on receiving their math entrance  
112 exam scores and walked out on college. Mr. Walton remembers a fellow student who  
113 failed to hand in a math assignment for the fourth time in the last week of class and  
114 learned that he would fail. The student lunged toward the professor and said, “I’ll kill  
115 you.”

116 “You can say whatever you want, but this really isn’t helping your grade,” the professor  
117 replied, Mr. Walton said.

118 The student stormed out the door with a final expletive, leaving the professor shaken.

### 119 **Fear of Appearing Ignorant**

120 The biggest challenge, professors say, is trying to engage students, to persuade them  
121 that ideas matter. Dr. McKusik suspects that behind the apathy is a fear of appearing  
122 ignorant.

123 “Everything in society is geared to celebrate, to value, the winner,” she said. “These are  
124 students who haven’t been at the top. They won’t show themselves as vulnerable at all.”

125 With most students having commitments to jobs and families, community colleges  
126 typically offer little in the way of a social life or school spirit. So they need to find ways to  
127 reach their less traditional audience.

128 “That’s why we’re trying to use pop culture in the classroom, to get their attention,” said  
129 Betsy Gooden, an English teacher who, in a remedial reading class one day last spring,  
130 tried to coax students to discuss a television documentary.

131 Two or three students in a class of 10 women carried most of the discussion, which  
132 seemed more like Ricky Lake than Lit 101, with students reacting to the film almost  
133 exclusively in terms of their personal experiences.

134 They covered love, sex and cheating boyfriends. Before the class was over, two women  
135 disclosed that they had been raped. About half the students said nothing at all.

136 Karen Olson, a history professor, and David Truscello, who teaches English, are trying  
137 another common strategy, mixing remedial work with other subjects. They are co-  
138 teachers of a course that combines African-American history with composition.

139 Professor Olson says teachers should stop making “unrealistic assignments” like  
140 chapters from “600-page textbooks” and should meet students at their level, raising  
141 abilities by degrees.

142 In her class, she assigns more manageable readings and carves up the load, so no  
143 student is responsible for doing it all.

144 “It’s not like they’re living four years in a dorm,” Professor Truscello said.

145 Most are working, sometimes at more than one job.

146 “That impinges on everything,” he added. “I have students who take two buses to come  
147 to school. It’s amazing that they do it.”

## 148 **Solutions and Successes**

149 Another part of the solution at community colleges is in Student Success Centers. They  
150 are actually tutoring centers. Dundalk’s is open 63 hours a week.

151 Along a wall is a rack of handouts explaining points of grammar that might have last  
152 been explicitly taught in middle school, a measure of the immense ground to be made  
153 up. One covers comparative adjectives, explaining “more” vs. “most” or “smarter” vs.  
154 “smartest.” Another discusses using pronouns and verb tenses.

155 At one table, Kirn Shahzadi, 20, once an A student at Parkville High School, was being  
156 tutored a few hours before her final in remedial algebra. In addition to math, Ms.  
157 Shahzadi needed remedial courses in reading and one in helping with basic skills like  
158 note taking, researching and organizing schedules. By the second week of that course,  
159 she said, half the students had dropped out.

160 Still, the school has winners who make it through and feel that they have to fit into the  
161 changing workplace.

162 Mr. Walton said careers like his father's as a welder for a major construction company  
163 were now harder to find. His father rose to foreman, putting Mr. Walton's older brother  
164 through [Johns Hopkins University](#).

165 Mr. Walton, who married soon after high school, put himself through the Baltimore  
166 community college working as a security guard at \$7.80 an hour. He has had shoplifters  
167 pull knives on him and spray him with Mace, he said.

168 His salary covered the utilities and phone bills, and left his wife, an administrative  
169 assistant at Johns Hopkins, to pay the mortgage. He added that at times he suspected  
170 that she had felt more like a caretaker than a wife, and he worried for their future.

171 "I know she's sick and tired of taking care of me," he said in May. "It's rip-your-hair-out-  
172 at-night difficult."

173 But Mr. Walton made it through that remedial math class four years ago, ultimately  
174 praising the dean for standing firm. In June, he crossed a stage to receive an associate's  
175 degree in computer science. Next year, he plans to earn another degree in, of all things,  
176 math.

177 He said he would like to earn a full bachelor's, but hesitates.

178 "I'm scared to death of going to college," he said. "I'll be up to my eyeballs in debt."

179 This summer he sent his résumé even to employers demanding bachelor's degrees and  
180 several years' experience, hoping that his enthusiasm would compensate where  
181 credentials fell short. He sought positions that included tuition breaks for employees.

182 His strategy paid off with two offers, one in data entry at the community college here, a  
183 job he held on work study before graduating, and another as a technician repairing  
184 copying machines. Mr. Walton went for the second.

185 It offers benefits, tuition reimbursement and a salary of \$22,850 a year, with extra  
186 money toward buying a new car every few years.

187 "I feel a little bit more — I don't want to say confident — but maybe worthy," Mr. Walton  
188 said. "Now, I feel like I'm all that, and a bag of chips."