

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEVELOPMENTAL PLACEMENT AT TRI-C

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At Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), developmental placement should be viewed as one of the institution's most consequential early sorting decisions. That is especially true in a college where developmental courses do not generate college-level credit, many students placed into them never reach the college-level course, and the downstream outcomes attached to that starting point are exceptionally weak.

Developmental placement deserves more institutional attention than it usually receives. Large shares of Tri-C students, especially in math, begin there. Yet the downstream outcomes attached to that starting point are among the weakest visible anywhere in the student pathway. Internal estimates suggest that between 50 and 60 percent of Tri-C students place into developmental math, and between 20 and 25 percent place into developmental English. For students who enroll in developmental math, only about 10 percent later pass a college-level math course and roughly 3 percent graduate. The corresponding outcomes for pre-collegiate English are less severe, but still weak enough to warrant concern, with only about 9 percent of students who ever enroll in pre-collegiate English going on to graduate.

These figures matter even more when read alongside what Tri-C already knows about student progress. Internal momentum analysis shows that successful completion is closely tied to early accumulation of college-level credits, not simply continued enrollment. Students who begin with low earned college-level credit loads have very low completion likelihood, while even one later semester of successfully completed college-level credits at higher intensity is associated with dramatically stronger outcomes. Developmental placement therefore matters not only because it identifies students with academic need, but because it can delay or prevent entry into the very college-level work that is most closely associated with completion.

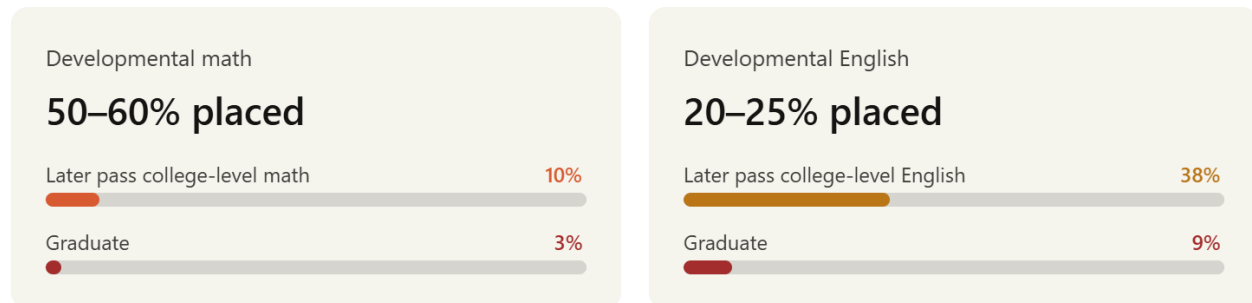
### Why this matters at Tri-C

- A student placed in a pre-collegiate course will likely never graduate.
- Most students placed into the developmental level never enroll in the college-level course, let alone pass it.
- Developmental courses do not generate college-level credit and therefore no momentum toward graduation.

Seen together, these conditions change the meaning of developmental placement. It is not only a judgment about academic readiness. It is also a decision about whether students begin their college experience inside the credit-bearing curriculum or outside it, whether they are

likely ever to reach the gateway course, and whether their early effort produces any college-level momentum at all.

Where developmental placement begins — and where it tends to lead



National research helps explain why the consequences are so severe. Studies of developmental education have found that sequence loss occurs less because students fail classes than because they never begin the referred course, or fail to continue to the next one. Research on placement itself has also shown that test-only systems misassign substantial numbers of students and that multiple measures can reduce those errors while preserving success in college-level coursework. The question for Tri-C, then, is not whether some students arrive needing support. The question is whether current placement practices and course structures are sending too many students into one of the weakest outcome pathways the institution has.

### A sorting point with long consequences

Developmental placement is often treated as an early academic checkpoint, a way of determining where students should begin. That description is true as far as it goes, but it understates the practical consequences of the decision. Placement does not simply indicate where a student starts. It shapes whether the student begins in courses that count toward a credential, how quickly visible progress becomes possible, how much tuition and financial aid are spent before credit accumulation begins, and how many semesters of continued stability the student must string together before the pathway begins to look rewarding.

At Tri-C, those consequences are magnified by the enrollment behavior of the student body. The College does not primarily serve students whose lives are organized around a stable, full-time academic model. It serves a population for whom work schedules, caregiving demands, transportation, health, and finances regularly affect how much time can be devoted to college from one semester to the next. In that environment, a longer front-end sequence is not merely an academic inconvenience. It is an exposure to risk. Each added requirement creates another point at which momentum can weaken, another term in which life can intervene, and another delay before students experience the satisfaction of earning credit that clearly moves them toward a goal.

At an institution where early college-level credit accumulation is closely associated with later completion, that distinction matters. If about one third of students who enroll in math begin in a developmental

A placement decision is also a pacing decision.

course, and broader placement estimates suggest that between half and three fifths of Tri-C students place into developmental math, then developmental math is one of the College's largest early sorting mechanisms. Yet only about 10 percent of those students later pass a college-level math course, and only about 3 percent graduate. Even if placement is directionally identifying students with academic need, those downstream outcomes are weak enough that the institution cannot treat them as an acceptable byproduct of proper diagnosis.

The English pattern is less severe but still troubling. Internal estimates suggest that between 20 and 25 percent of Tri-C students place into developmental English. The graduation rate for students who ever enroll in pre-collegiate English is about 9 percent. That is meaningfully higher than the 3 percent attached to developmental math, but it is still a low-probability pathway to credential attainment. If one quarter or more of entering students are being directed into a starting point associated with a single-digit graduation rate, the institutional burden of proof shifts. The question is no longer whether some students need additional support. The question becomes whether the support structure as currently organized is preserving possibility or narrowing it.

### Developmental placement in a momentum framework

Tri-C's momentum work offers an especially useful lens for interpreting developmental placement. That work shows that students who successfully earn more college-level credits early have far better completion outcomes than those who do not. Students earning 12 or more college-level credits in the first fall term have much stronger completion prospects than those earning 6 to 11.9 credits, and both groups substantially outperform students earning fewer than 6. The underlying lesson is that successful progress in college-level coursework appears to matter a great deal.

The institution can record enrollment continuity while the student experiences a much thinner form of progress.

Developmental placement affects that equation immediately. Developmental courses do not count toward degree completion. A student can invest time, tuition, energy, and attention and still remain at zero earned college-level credits. For a student already enrolled at low intensity, that delay can be

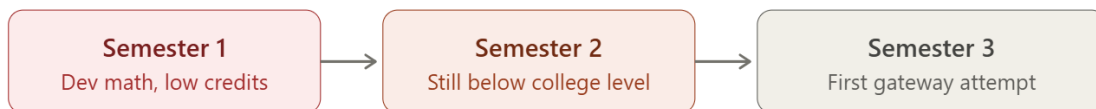
consequential. A student taking one or two courses per semester while beginning in developmental coursework may be persisting in a formal sense, but accumulating little momentum toward a credential.

The central institutional issue is that developmental placement delays entry into the part of the curriculum where momentum can begin. Developmental courses do not move students toward degree-applicable credit. If students then fail to enroll in the next course in the sequence, or never make it to the gateway course, the College has effectively created a starting point from which many students never reach meaningful academic momentum at all.

When developmental placement is added to an already fragile beginning, the consequences compound. A student who starts below college level faces a slower route into the credit-bearing curriculum. A student who stops out, changes work hours, loses childcare, or withdraws from a course is more likely to do so before any meaningful college-level momentum has been established. The longer the period before visible credit-bearing progress begins, the more chances there are for the pathway to dissolve.

Enrollment continuity is not the same as momentum

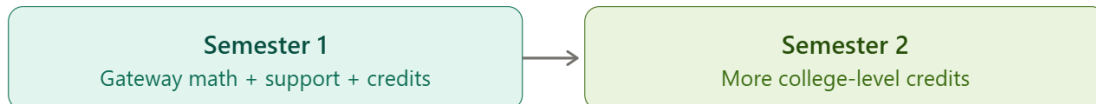
#### Student A — developmental start



College-level credits earned



#### Student B — co-requisite support



College-level credits earned



Comparing Student A and Student B, both may remain enrolled for a time, but only one is building visible college-level momentum.

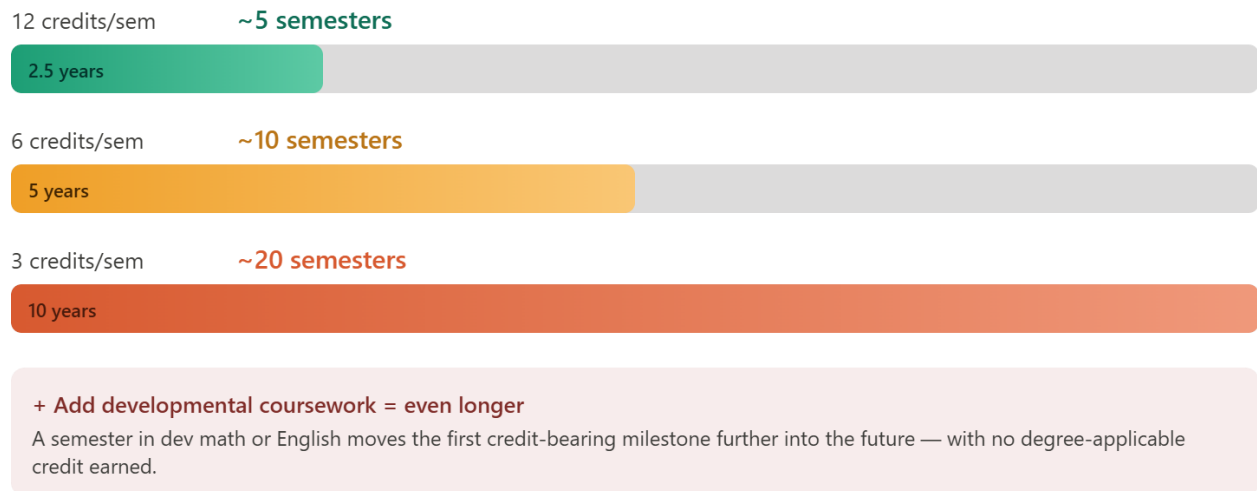
This helps explain why developmental education should not be discussed as a separate topic from retention, momentum, or adult student design. It sits directly inside all three. A college that wants stronger first-year momentum cannot ignore the effects of a starting structure that delays entry into college-level credits. A college that knows many students placed below college level will never reach the gateway course cannot treat that loss as a secondary issue. A college that serves adults with constrained and unstable time cannot treat additional semesters of non-credit-bearing coursework as though they carry little institutional consequence.

## The arithmetic students experience

Tri-C's survey and advising experience suggest that many students begin college with strong confidence that they will graduate, and that many expect to do so within two years. That optimism is understandable, but it creates a striking gap between student expectation and pathway arithmetic.

That gap already exists for many students because of credit load alone. A student taking 6 credits a semester needs roughly seven semesters to reach 60 credits, assuming no failed or withdrawn courses. A student taking 3 credits a semester would need far longer. Once developmental coursework is added, the timeline extends further. A semester spent in developmental math or English may improve readiness for some students, but it also moves the first credit-bearing milestone farther into the future. For students who start with a clear goal but only partial understanding of the pace required to reach it, that delayed visibility matters.

The arithmetic students experience — semesters to reach 60 credits



Developmental placement delays entry into the part of the curriculum where momentum can begin.

This is not simply a communications problem. It is a design problem. Students are not miscalculating only because they are inattentive. They are responding to a structure that often emphasizes access to enrollment more than clarity about trajectory. If the institution invites students into pathways that are associated with weak

long-term odds, slower visible progress, and lower course success, it has to take responsibility for how legible those consequences are at the front end.

Developmental placement therefore deserves attention not only because of where it starts students academically, but because of the expectations it intersects with psychologically. Students tend to enter with hope, confidence, and a strong desire to move forward. A pathway that delays credit-bearing progress while producing lower success rates can quietly weaken the very confidence students bring with them. That weakening may not appear immediately in official retention numbers. It can emerge first as slower re-enrollment, dropped courses, diminished willingness to intensify, or a gradual erosion of belief that the effort is leading somewhere practical.

### Why the modality shift matters

The post-pandemic shift toward online and hybrid enrollment gives this issue additional urgency. A much larger share of students now enroll in online or hybrid sections than before the pandemic. That change matters for developmental education because the earliest stages of college often depend heavily on structure, quick feedback, routine contact, and rapid recognition of confusion. When students begin below college level in environments that require more self-management, the risk of silent drift can increase.

This concern is not speculative. National research has found that developmental coursework delivered online has often been associated with weaker outcomes than face-to-face instruction, particularly for students with greater academic vulnerability. That does not mean online learning is inherently inappropriate or that face-to-face instruction is always superior. It does mean that modality interacts with readiness, confidence, and life structure in ways that require care. For students placed into developmental coursework, especially those attending part-time or returning after a break from formal education, the combination of lower starting point and less embodied academic structure can be consequential.

At Tri-C, where more students are now moving through online and hybrid patterns, developmental placement can no longer be considered apart from modality design. The question is not simply whether students are placed into pre-collegiate coursework, but under what conditions they are asked to complete it. If success rates in developmental courses are already about 10 percentage points lower than in college-level math and English, and if a greater share of students are encountering those courses in partially or fully online formats, then the institution should be especially careful about assuming that traditional placement structures remain educationally defensible simply because they are familiar.

### What national research suggests

Over the past two decades, the research literature on developmental education has become increasingly clear about several broad patterns. First, placement systems that rely primarily on a single test score place too many students below college level. Studies from the Community College Research Center and others have shown that substantial numbers of students assigned to remediation could have succeeded if allowed to begin in college-level

courses. Multiple-measures placement, using prior academic performance and other indicators alongside or instead of a test score, has repeatedly shown stronger results.

Second, much of the loss associated with developmental education occurs not because students fail a course they took, but because they never move successfully through the sequence. Some students do not enroll in the referred developmental course at all. Others pass one course but do not continue to the next. Others stop out before reaching the gateway course. In other words, the mechanism of loss is often not academic collapse inside a classroom. It is attrition across the sequence.

Third, reforms that reduce the distance between entry and college-level coursework tend to produce better outcomes than long prerequisite models. Co-requisite supports, compressed sequences, and direct placement into gateway courses with structured assistance have generally outperformed older multi-course remedial pipelines. The common theme in these reforms is not lower standards. It is shorter distance to credit-bearing momentum.

These national findings do not automatically settle what Tri-C should do in every detail. Local context matters. Student populations differ. Faculty concerns deserve serious treatment. Course content and sequencing cannot simply be collapsed by declaration. Still, the broad direction of the research matters because it suggests that the risks now visible in Tri-C's data are not isolated local anomalies. They are consistent with a larger body of evidence showing that long remedial starting points often reduce rather than expand the number of students who reach college-level success.

### **The particular vulnerability of adult and part-time students**

The relationship between developmental placement and adult student realities deserves especially close attention. Adult students often return to college with strong intent and practical reasons for enrolling. They may also carry more constraints than younger students whose schedules are more fully organized around school. Work schedules change. Caregiving demands expand or contract unexpectedly. Transportation and finances remain unstable. Confidence may be high at entry, but available time is often fragile.

For these students, the costs of developmental placement are not abstract. Additional non-credit-bearing coursework can mean another semester before a wage-relevant course begins, another semester of juggling school with work for no degree-applicable credit, another semester in which financial aid is consumed without visible advancement. Even when adults are highly motivated, the practical value of sustained enrollment may become harder to defend if early effort is not producing progress that is recognizable and cumulative.

Tri-C's own work on momentum strengthens this point. The distinction between students earning fewer than 6 college-level credits and those earning 6 to 11.9 is not trivial. It is associated with substantially different completion prospects. Yet developmental placement makes it harder for many students even to enter that first meaningful college-level momentum

band. The College may therefore be trying to improve retention, persistence, or adult student success further downstream while leaving largely intact one of the front-end structures most likely to slow or weaken momentum before it begins.

This is why developmental education cannot be treated as a technical placement matter owned by one office or one academic domain. It is intertwined with pathway clarity, schedule design, advising, modality, course sequencing, and the broader logic of how the College expects adults with constrained time to persist. When developmental placement is weakly aligned with those realities, the institution may unintentionally ask students for a degree of stability that their lives do not reliably permit.

### What greater institutional care would mean

To say that Tri-C should take greater care about developmental placement is not to say that every student should automatically begin in college-level coursework without support. Nor is it to deny that some students arrive with substantial skill gaps that need to be addressed honestly. The point is that a placement system should be judged not only by whether it identifies areas of academic weakness, but by whether the pathway attached to that identification preserves realistic routes to momentum and completion.

Greater care begins with the consequences. If large shares of students are being placed into starting points associated with very low gateway and graduation outcomes, that fact should be central to institutional judgment. If developmental course success rates trail college-level success rates by roughly 10 percentage points, the College should consider what those lower rates mean when multiplied across already longer and more fragile pathways. If most students attend part-time and many are adults with constrained time, the institution should evaluate developmental structures with those patterns at the center rather than at the margins.

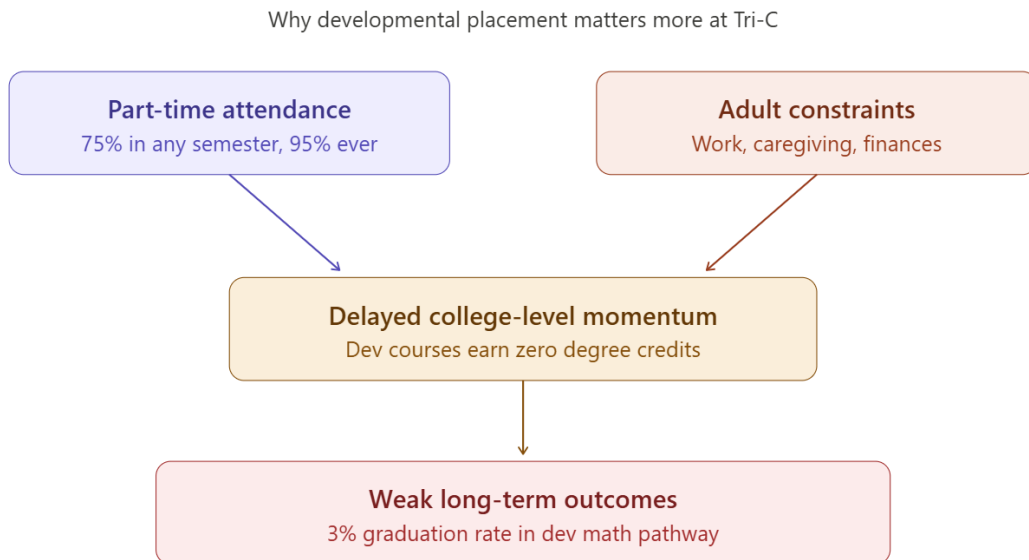
Greater care also means taking placement error seriously. A system does not need to be arbitrary in order to be too blunt. Even reasonably designed placement practices can send too many students into coursework below the level at which they could succeed, especially when they rely too heavily on test scores taken at a single moment in time. The institutional question is not whether placement methods are defensible in principle. It is whether they are precise enough, humane enough, and outcome-conscious enough for the student population Tri-C actually serves.

Finally, greater care means treating developmental education as part of the College's larger design logic. A student's pathway is shaped by the interaction of placement, advising, course scheduling, modality, work obligations, and confidence about what lies ahead. A college can lose students through the cumulative effect of individually reasonable policies that, taken together, create too much distance between entry and progress. Developmental placement becomes especially consequential in such systems because it lengthens the time before students experience the academic return on their effort.

## What the institutional evidence now suggests

Taken together, the evidence points in a consistent direction. Tri-C's completion prospects improve substantially when college-level momentum begins to build early, yet a substantial share of students are placed into developmental coursework, especially in math, where the downstream outcomes are among the weakest visible anywhere in the student pathway. Many students placed into developmental coursework never reach the college-level course, and developmental coursework itself produces no degree-applicable credit while students are taking it.

That pattern does not prove that developmental education is the only cause of weak outcomes, nor that every student currently placed below college level should be placed differently. It does, however, suggest that developmental placement is one of the College's most consequential early design decisions and that its effects have likely been underread when discussed primarily as a matter of student preparation. At Tri-C, developmental placement appears less as a neutral response to need and more as a sorting mechanism that can delay momentum, consume scarce time, and lower the probability that students ever reach the part of the curriculum where progress becomes visible and self-reinforcing.



The stronger institutional question, then, is not whether developmental education has value in the abstract. It is whether Tri-C's current approach takes adequate account of what the College now knows about momentum, student expectations, adult student realities, and post-pandemic modality patterns. A college that has learned this much about the fragility of momentum should be cautious about maintaining any front-end structure that delays college-level credit, prevents students from reaching the gateway course, or weakens momentum before it begins.

## Conclusion

Tri-C has already developed important insight into how student progress actually unfolds. The College knows that most students do not move through a stable full-time pathway. It knows that early college-level credit accumulation is strongly associated with completion. It knows that many students begin with optimistic expectations that do not match the pace their enrollment intensity will produce. It also knows that a substantial share of students, especially in math, are placed into developmental coursework associated with very weak long-term outcomes.

That combination of knowledge changes the institutional burden of attention. Developmental placement can no longer be treated as a routine front-end process that sits outside the College's broader questions of momentum and completion. It is part of the same story. At Tri-C, it should be understood as one of the earliest and most consequential points at which institutional design can either preserve possibility or quietly narrow it.

For too many students, especially in developmental math, that starting point appears to lead into one of the weakest trajectories the institution has.

The case for greater care rests there. In a college where time is scarce, attendance is fluid, and momentum is fragile, the decision to place students into non-credit-bearing coursework carries consequences that extend far beyond the classroom in which that placement begins. For too many students, especially in developmental math, that starting point appears to lead into one of the weakest trajectories the institution has. That fact alone warrants closer institutional scrutiny.

## Sources

Tri-C internal research on developmental placement, gateway success, course success, part-time enrollment, retention, momentum, and student expectations.

Community College Research Center studies on placement accuracy, developmental sequence attrition, multiple-measures placement, and co-requisite reform.

National post-pandemic research on online and hybrid enrollment patterns and the performance of students in developmental education across modalities.