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By John Merrow

## Community College: A Harsh Reality

Math 096 covers a lot in a short time, mostly 9th- and 10th-grade material eight hours a week for six weeks. "You can't afford to miss a class," George McCormack, who teaches it at LaGuardia Community College, in Queens, warned his students as the intersession intensive revved up early last year. "This is a demanding course, there's no question about it."

Krystal Jenkins, now 20, knew he was telling the truth. She had already failed remedial math three times with three different teachers, but until she passed basic algebra, she could not take courses in her major.

Ms. Jenkins has always wanted to be a veterinarian. Even after having a baby as a high school sophomore and settling for a G.E.D., she did not give up on the dream. "I've always loved animals," she said. "I feel I was put on earth to be a vet, and my daughter is my motivation."

So she decided on this different approach: a concentrated course. "If I do not pass," she said. "I probably will stop going to school."

According to the most recent federal statistics, 42 percent of public community college freshmen take remedial courses. Experts insist the number is vastly higher, because data collection is spotty. At LaGuardia and Joliet Junior College, for example, 80 percent of new students must take at least one catch-up course in math, reading or writing, based on a placement test. At LaGuardia, only about 46 percent make it through in reading, 41 percent in math. Remedial students can take the same course over and over until they pass, get discouraged and quit, or run out of money.

LaGuardia offered Ms. Jenkins a chance to fulfill her dream. It will admit anyone with a diploma or equivalent and has a strong program for veterinary technicians, the animal world's equivalent of a nurse. But vet tech is math-heavy. Becoming an actual vet requires a bachelor's degree and four years at a school of veterinary medicine.

After a few classes, Ms. Jenkins was feeling confident. She seemed to be doing better, with a 72 on her first big test. "I'd say it's 90 percent sure that I will pass this time," she said. "I'm very determined to pass the class. That's why I come every morning on time. No matter how tired I am, I still wake up and come to school."

But she left the midterm exam early, feeling frustrated. "I really didn't understand the questions and I couldn't really get the answers, so basically I kind of guessed, guessed most of them." She said she hadn't been able to study the night before because she was exhausted.

Nor had she gone to her teacher for help.

"I don't have other time, the extra time to go study, and sit down and review my notes and stuff," she said. "I'm on my feet seven-and-a-half hours a day." In addition to doing her job checking groceries, Ms. Jenkins had to travel close to three hours a day — from home in the Bronx to school to work and back, usually after 10:30 p.m.

Like many other community college students, Krystal Jenkins is a full-time parent with a full-time job and a full-time course load. She is close to the edge financially. She shares a small two-bedroom apartment with her parents, her boyfriend, her 4-year-old daughter, a gerbil and a cat. And she is behind academically.

Kay McClenney, of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, calls remedial education "job one" for two-year colleges. Yet 79 percent of remedial classes are taught by part-time faculty, according to a new study published in *Research in Developmental Education*.

In my visits to remedial classrooms around the country, I saw students wearing headphones, text-messaging and reading nonclass material during class time. On one occasion a class that began with 20 students had only six after the break. Most of the teachers told me they had not been trained to work with at-risk students. They were biology or English majors and, in one case, a college's full-time Webmaster.

Classrooms like these do not surprise Nancy Shulock, who studies community colleges. A professor at Sacramento State University, she says two-year colleges "are trying to do remediation on the cheap."

Her analysis: "They don't have the money, and they don't have the money because society thinks that it is cheap. It's a circular logic that's not going to get us out of this box."

Mike Kirst of Stanford calls for more accountability. "We don't know exactly how many students they take who could have succeeded with better teaching." He cites what economists call the churn model, in which success is unrewarded and failure unpunished. "As long as the number of students coming in the front equals the number of students dropping out the back door and side door, their enrollment and full-time equivalence is the same, whether they're advancing and graduating or flunking out." Because demand is high, he says, "there is really no incentive to spend a lot of the money to serve these students with special counselors and trained teachers."

Fewer than half of the remedial classes at LaGuardia are taught by full-time faculty. But Mr. McCormack, Ms. Jenkins's teacher, is full time and trained in remedial education. He earned his doctorate in mathematics education at Teachers College at Columbia University and has been teaching math at LaGuardia for four years. Ms. Jenkins called him the best teacher she had had. He moved easily around Ms. Jenkins's classroom, urging students to ask questions and solve problems.

On the day of her final, Krystal Jenkins was nowhere to be found. We discovered her at her apartment that afternoon. She had skipped the exam. "It all came crashing down," she said. "The whole semester I've been doing so much at one time, and I couldn't deal with it anymore. I just wasn't strong enough to handle it."

Mr. McCormack allowed her to take the test several days later. Still she did not pass, though 25 of the 31 students enrolled did well enough to move on. Ms. Jenkins dropped out of LaGuardia. Expecting her second child at the end of May, she now works at an Old Navy store and says she still owes the college \$2,035.

What happened here? Should Ms. Jenkins have been counseled into making a more realistic career choice? Would a different approach to instruction have made the material stick?

Professor Shulock admits the obvious but asks for understanding: "Community colleges are unprepared to teach the unprepared," she says, "but who is doing it better?"

LaGuardia, which is part of the City University of New York, won the MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Award for 2006, for innovative programs for underserved students. It is one of 13 colleges and universities cited as an "Institution of Excellence" by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Among various services, it provides free tutoring at math labs.

Gail Mellow, the president, offers this explanation: "We have lots of innovations but no resources to bring them to scale. If we get half of the students like Krystal through, given our resources, that's amazing."

This semester, LaGuardia started a pilot program to try to bring in — for special tutoring, advising and evaluations — students who have failed remedial math more than once. Only students who are doing adequately in other courses are being contacted (those with an overall G.P.A. of 2.0 — 70, all told).

The focus is on math, says Cindy Freidmutter, vice president for external and community affairs, because it's an anxiety-producing "stumbling block." Many remedial students have been away from classroom math for some time and need a refresher, she says; others, like Krystal Jenkins with her G.E.D., missed out on years of basic high school math.

Ms. Jenkins, who said she had a G.P.A. of 2.9, could have benefited from the new initiative. She said she visited the counseling office two or three times. "I got a little card telling me I had to come in, so I went in with a list of classes I wanted to take, and they just said O.K." Did anyone discuss her plans or ask how she was doing? "No," Ms. Jenkins said, simply.

"She did not make it," Ms. Mellow says, "but many do, and they are heroes." It's a matter of taking advantage of resources and making time for study. "Krystal would never be able to make it through remedial math if she couldn't dedicate at least 15 hours a week of work at home."

Ms. Mellow says she does not favor interfering with what educators call "the right to fail." LaGuardia caps the number of times a student can take college-level courses at two. But like most community colleges, it does not restrict the number of times a student can take a developmental course.

"Who are we to say a student shouldn't keep on trying?" Ms. Mellow says.