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The Costs of Catching Up

The Alliance for Excellent Education, a high-school focused think tank, released a report on Tuesday estimating the cost of remediation for community colleges in all 50 states. In sum, the report indicates that two-year institutions spend \$1.4 billion annually to help students receive the skills they need in order to graduate or join the work force — skills they ideally should have earned in high school.

On the low end, Alaska is spending approximately \$182,000 on such endeavors, while California, at about \$135 million, spends the most. ([For the full state listings, turn to page six of the report.](#))

Officials with the alliance calculated the price tag by multiplying the cost of one course by the number of students under the age of 25 who take at least one remedial course, as gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2004. (NCES also estimates that 42 percent of community college freshmen and 20 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions enroll in at least one remedial course.)

Bob Wise, president of the organization, said that the new estimates are probably on the “very conservative” end because the numbers do not include students who attend four-year public or private colleges, nor older community college students. Additionally, they assume that each student takes only one remedial course. “It’s a somewhat murky world,” he said. “It just isn’t always easy to figure out what remediation costs really are.”

Gary Palmer, president of the Alabama Policy Institute — a nonprofit research organization — noted that his own organization conducted a study in 2004 that found remediation costs at two-year institutions alone in the state to be about \$48 million. The Alliance for Excellent Education’s new analysis puts Alabama’s number at \$24 million.

“It’s difficult to estimate all of the costs involved with remedial education,” said Palmer. He added that because states cover different amounts of tuition, number crunching can often be difficult. “It all comes down to how you calculate it,” he added.

No matter how the numbers are derived, Wise believes that the economy will suffer immensely if the problem isn’t curbed. “It’s the difference between having a student who ends up as a fast food worker and one who ends up operating CAT scan machines,” he said.

To help curb the problem, Wise suggested that statewide performance standards for college admission would enable educators to better assess student progress toward readiness for college. According to the report, states with these standards in place, such as West Virginia and Florida, have seen a long-term decline in the proportion of students who need remediation.

“It’s not going to be an easy task,” said Wise. “We’re having to reverse a century of one type of system — but I think we can do it.”

— [Rob Capriccioso](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/08/30/remediation>.