

Basic skills are barriers to success for many students

By JENNIFER OLDHAM
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LOS ANGELES — The three petite, soft-spoken Latinas are all friends. They graduated from Grant High School here, are on one another's speed dial and share a preference for electric blue. All three are stuck in basic-skills courses at Los Angeles Valley College after bombing their college placement exams, in part because they had so little guidance about what would be tested.

"I did bad — I was tired," said Karina Carrillo, 18. "I was surprised that I had to take so many English classes over. They won't even count as college credit for two years."

The experience of Carrillo and her classmates Sonia Ortega and Mariana Casillas at their two-year college reflects a graduation crisis at community colleges — one that President Barack Obama addressed at a White House summit last week. "More than half of those who enter community colleges fail to either earn a two-year degree or transfer to earn a four-year degree," Obama said.

The stakes of getting stuck in remedial classes and never earning a degree are especially high in California, which is home to the nation's largest community college system, with 112 campuses and 2.9 million students. Nationally, between 60 percent and 80 percent are placed in the basic-skills classes Carrillo and her classmates can't escape, leading many to quit



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From left, Karina Carrillo, Mariana Casillas and Sonia Ortega relax during a recent morning on the Los Angeles Valley College campus in Los Angeles. Like many of their peers, they must all take multiple basic-skills courses.

in frustration.

Remedial education is where far too many community college students begin and end their careers, and it remains one of the most intractable obstacles to graduation, said Tom Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College at Columbia University. Only 31 percent of students placed into remedial math ever get to college-level work, and half of students referred to remediation of any kind complete the entire sequence, Bailey has found.

Bailey's research has shown that remedial education is often ineffective, and students

who need it drop out at alarming rates. So Obama called for the first White House summit on community colleges after setting a goal last year of increasing the number of students who earn degrees and certificates from the two-year institutions by 5 million in the next decade.

The placement tests that determine whether students are ready for college-level work are the first big hurdle to graduation, said the authors of a new study on California community colleges.

High school counselors aren't advising students about how to prepare for the tests, according to "One-Shot Deal? Students'

Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement in California's Community Colleges," by the education research agency WestEd. Too often, students who likely would have passed if they'd simply reviewed certain math or reading concepts find themselves on the remedial track.

"It wasn't a test of what you could do, but about what you could remember from a long time ago," one student who took algebra and geometry in high school told researchers. He was tested on fractions he hadn't studied for years and placed into basic math.

The study based its find-

ings in part on interviews with 257 students at five California community colleges. It sheds new light on the poorly understood, and often ineffective, course-placement structure at the state's community colleges, which educate three-quarters of its college students. Too often, students get little counseling and may have less than a day to formulate their education plans, said Michael Kirst, a professor emeritus at Stanford University.

"At community colleges, people just show up and are processed immediately," Kirst said. "This raises questions about whether this one-shot assessment is an appropriate measure of what you know and what you don't know."

Exam questions often bear no relation to what students learned in high school, the study found. The exams are essentially one-size-fits-all, meaning that students who have small gaps in their knowledge or skills are placed into classes where they actually know most of the material. Some 83 percent of incoming students scored so low that they were placed in remedial math courses that don't count for college credit, while 72 percent of students tested into remedial English.

"What we found are indications of a broken system. It's shockingly bad, the lack of completion, and the placement into basic-skills classes, and the amount of time students swirl in these classes," said Andrea Venezia, a senior research associate at WestEd and a co-author of the study.