CAPR | CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS

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# Dana Center Mathematics Pathways Long-Term Follow-Up Cost Analysis

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## Overview

Following up on a previous impact and cost study of the Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) model, which used an individual-level randomized controlled trial, this study assesses the costs and cost-effectiveness of the program on longer-term college progress and college attainment. The version of DCMP included in this study diversified the developmental and college-level math course content, separating the content into distinct pathways that better aligned with students' career interests. It also streamlined the developmental math sequence into a one-semester developmental course for all students, regardless of placement level, and implemented an evidence-based curricula and pedagogy to engage students in active problem solving pertinent to real-life situations. The study, which included 1,411 students across four Texas community colleges and ten campuses, found that DCMP saves students money and may be cost-effective when used as part of a larger strategy to improve student success.

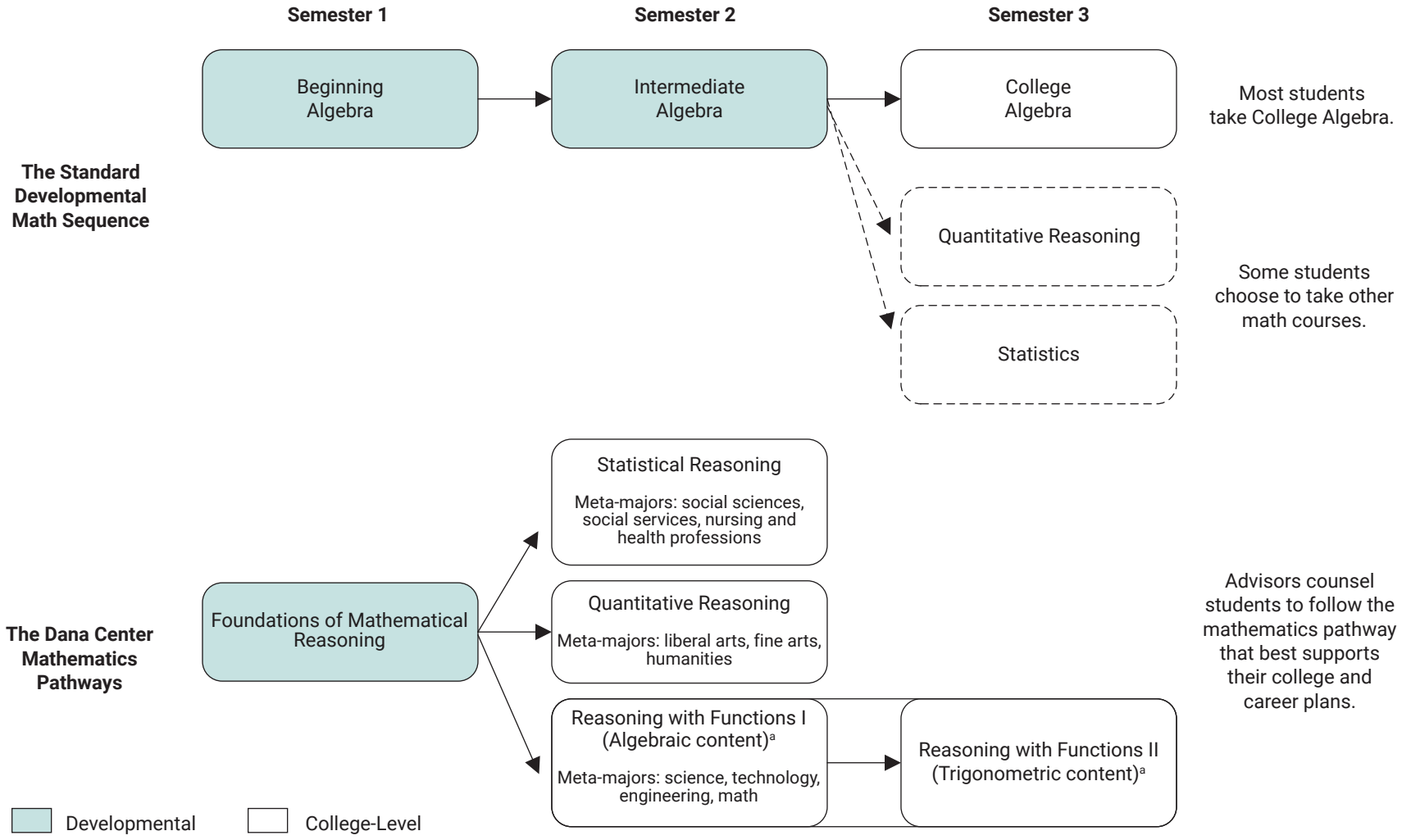
# Introduction

Community colleges have been struggling for decades to better support students who are deemed academically underprepared for college-level work in math. Historically, incoming college students who need remedial support to bring their mathematics skills up to college-level standards have been required to take and pay for a sequence of several semester-length non-credit bearing courses, referred to as developmental math courses. A longitudinal study from the Institute of Education Sciences found that, in the early 2000s, 59 percent of students entering two-year institutions were taking at least one developmental math course and students of color and students from lower income backgrounds were more likely than their White and higher income peers to take these courses.[1] Being referred to developmental math courses is also highly correlated with dropping out of school.[2] With these troubling statistics in mind, many colleges, university systems, and states have taken bold action to reform developmental education, making changes to everything from the way they assess students' college readiness to the structure and sequencing of developmental education courses. Many of these reforms are showing promising results in rigorous studies.[3] Fewer reforms, however, have sought to address some of the most challenging problems with respect to developmental and college-level math: course content and teaching methods.

The Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Dana Center) launched the Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP, formerly the New Mathways Project) in 2011 with the support of the Texas Association of Community Colleges. At the time, the program diversified the developmental and college-level math course content, creating distinct pathways that better aligned with students' career interests. It streamlined the developmental math sequence, as shown in Figure 1, so that students who tested two or more levels below college ready in math were only required to take a one-semester developmental course. It also implemented evidence-based curricula and pedagogy to engage students in active problem solving pertinent to real-life situations. (See Box 1.) The Dana Center hypothesized that these key components would support students in ways that would make them more likely to complete the developmental math sequence, pass their first-year college-level math course, and accumulate more math credits (math completion). Changes in math completion would help students persist in college longer and accumulate more credits (academic progress), and ultimately be more likely to earn a certificate or degree (academic attainment).

Starting in 2014, researchers from the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness—a partnership between the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, and MDRC, as well as research scholars from several universities—began studying DCMP using a randomized controlled trial at four Texas community colleges (Brookhaven, Eastfield, El Paso, and Trinity Valley). A 2019 report shared early findings from the study, including cost findings.[4] This brief is part of the long-term follow-up study and provides additional cost data analysis from the five years of follow-up research. It compares those costs to five-year cumulative academic outcomes, providing estimates of cost effectiveness.

## FIGURE 1. A Comparison of Mathematics Courses for Students with Two Levels of Developmental Need




NOTE: [a]Evaluation of Reasoning with Functions I and II is outside of the scope of this study.

## BOX 1. WHAT IS THE DANA CENTER MATHEMATICS PATHWAYS PROGRAM?

There are four key components of the Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) program: multiple pathways, accelerated developmental sequence, curriculum and pedagogy, and student success strategies. Since the launch of this early version of DCMP, the Dana Center has continued to refine and update the program over time.*

**Multiple math pathways aligned to different fields of study.** The program separates the developmental and college-level math course content into three distinct pathways. These include a statistics pathway for students majoring in social and health sciences; a quantitative reasoning pathway for students majoring in the humanities; and a calculus pathway for students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) majors. (The STEM pathway was not included in this study.) All three pathways begin with a one-semester Foundations of Mathematical Reasoning course that covers algebra (the content of standard developmental math courses) but also emphasizes statistics and quantitative literacy. Upon successful completion of the Foundations course, students in the DCMP program are offered a one-semester college-level statistics or quantitative reasoning course or they begin a two-semester path to calculus. However, most of the DCMP students who enroll in a college-level math course move into a standard college-level statistics or quantitative reasoning course offered at the college.

**Accelerated developmental sequence.** DCMP streamlines the developmental math sequence so that all developmental content is covered in one semester, rather than multiple semesters, even for students who test two or more levels below college ready in math. Once students pass the DCMP developmental math course, they are able to take college-level math the following semester. The program's goal is that all students, regardless of math level, can complete a college-level math course and complete their college-level math requirement during their first year of college.

**Evidence-based, student-centered curriculum and pedagogy.** The DCMP model includes curriculum and classroom instructional practices that engage students in active problem solving pertinent to real-life situations. The model emphasizes collaborative student learning and requires students to demonstrate their ability to read, write, and communicate orally about their math learning.

**Student success strategies.** The DCMP model includes supports for students as learners that are integrated into courses and aligned across the college. Instructors are encouraged to incorporate activities that support and engage students in their learning and help them develop the attitudes that will foster their success in college. Student support staff members and others at the college are encouraged to support student success with regular check-ins or tutoring, among other activities.

*NOTE: *For example, the Center has integrated a corequisite remediation course structure into their model recommendations. This structure further accelerates students' entrance into credit-bearing courses. Instead of the one-semester developmental course included in the version of DCMP in this study, students may enter directly into a college credit course in their pathway. At the same time, those students in need of developmental assistance may receive holistic services that include a companion support course, tutoring, help from an advisor, or other services. See Connie Richardson,* Corequisite Mathematics Toolkit *(Austin: Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, 2021).*

# DCMP Cost Analysis Goals and Data

## Cost Research Questions

The overarching research questions for the DCMP cost study are: What is the net cost of the DCMP program when compared to the status quo? How cost effective is the DCMP program at improving student outcomes when compared to the status quo? To address these questions, the study used the cost data collected in the initial study period combined with long-term follow-up data (as shown in Box 2) to determine:

### BOX 2. COST DATA SOURCES

In addition to the data sources used to estimate the academic outcomes, the cost analysis used the following data sources:*

**Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) Program Data.** DCMP cost data, including costs associated with training faculty and staff members, were collected from the Dana Center by the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR) during the initial study period.† The data collection period varied by college but included cost data from 2013 to 2016. Ongoing cost estimates are based on cost information for the 2016–2017 school year that the colleges reported to CAPR.‡ These program costs are presented below as estimated in the initial report, updated to 2022 dollars.

**Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).** Instructional activity as credit hours offered per academic year has been collected as reported on IPEDS for each institution. Institutional expenditure data, including total expenses and deductions, as well as other expenditure categories (instruction, academic support, student services, institutional support, and scholarships), have also been collected from IPEDS.§

*NOTES: *Susan Sepanik and Sukanya Barman, "Long-Term Effects of the Dana Center Math Pathways Model: Evidence from a Randomized Trial" (New York: MDRC, 2023).*

*†All dollar values in this cost and cost-effectiveness analysis have been adjusted to 2022 dollars. The analysis excludes all costs associated with CAPR's evaluation of DCMP. Start-up cost estimates are based on cost information reported to CAPR by the colleges. CAPR researchers developed a cost data collection tool that was completed with the colleges and included follow-up conversations with the colleges. Training costs are based on two years of data; administration and preparation costs are based on one year of data applied to two years; and material and travel costs are for the period reported by the college (which varied) applied to two years.*

*‡These costs are associated with DCMP's steady state operation. CAPR researchers modified the data collection tool that was used to collect start-up costs to be used for the collection of ongoing costs. CAPR researchers also had follow-up conversations with the colleges about the cost data.*

*§IPEDS of the National Center for Education Statistics provides data on college expenditures and instructional activity credit hours. MDRC calculated costs per credit by taking the IPEDS total expenses for the participating colleges (including developmental course costs) and dividing by the IPEDS instructional activity credit hours, a number which—unfortunately for this purpose—does not include developmental credits. Because developmental courses are included in the numerator but not the denominator, costs per credit using IPEDS data are likely to be overestimated. However, this overestimate occurs for both groups' base costs, which would cancel out in the net cost calculation. Indirect or induced costs may still be overestimated. See Richard M. Romano, Rita J. Kirshstein, Mark D'Amico, Willard Hom, and Michelle Van Noy, "Adjusting College Costs for Noncredit Enrollments: An Issue for Data Geeks or Policy Makers?"* Community College Review *47, 2 (2019): 159–177.*

- The social cost per student for DCMP and the traditional developmental math sequence, including indirect costs throughout the evaluation follow-up period of five years[5]
- The cost per outcome (cost per degree earned and cost per college credit earned) for DCMP and the traditional developmental math sequence throughout the evaluation follow-up period of five years

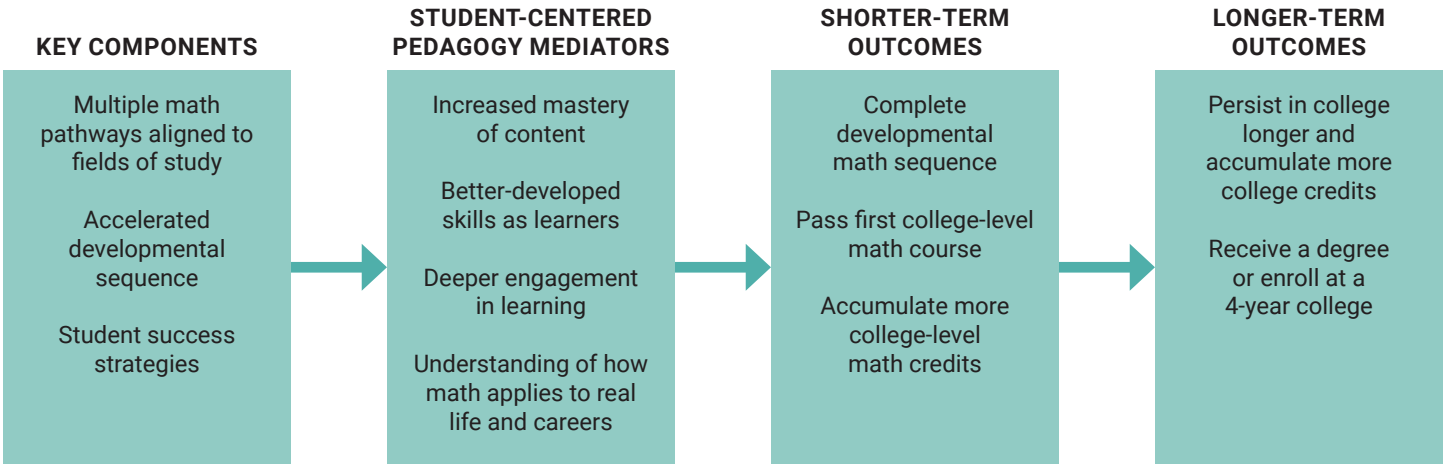
These are important measures for cost effectiveness because they represent the last measures from the DCMP theory of action shown in Figure 2.[6]

## Research Question 1: Social Cost of DCMP per Student

In order to calculate the cost of DCMP per student, the study team first had to calculate the various start up and continuing costs of implementing the program at the four colleges. This was done for all four cohorts of students who entered the program during the fall 2015 to spring 2017 period. The key findings from the 2019 report provide the basis for calculating the cost of DCMP per student offered the program:[7]

- Start-up costs: The switch from the traditional developmental math sequence to DCMP required an initial investment from both the Dana Center and the colleges. Dana Center start-up costs included providing support for state revisions of assessment and course requirements, online learning sessions for instructors, curricula development with colleges, and transfer and alignment workshops, which were necessary for the program to be implemented with fidelity. These were approximately $295,057 across all four colleges. In 2022 dollars, this amount would equal $345,220 or $400 per student. The average start-up cost per college, including administration, training, and other preparation over two years was an additional $140,450. In 2022 dollars, this amount would equal $163,960 or $770 per student.
- Steady-state costs: Any ongoing increase in costs to the DCMP colleges over and above what was needed for standard developmental math was low. The steady-state cost of running a

**FIGURE 2. The Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) Model's Theory of Action as Evaluated in This Study**



DCMP program in this study averaged $19,340 per college per year. In 2022 dollars, this would equal $22,620 or $210 per student.

By combining the start-up costs at the four colleges and the Dana Center, and the ongoing costs of the program at four colleges for two years, the cost of the program is estimated at approximately $1,183,550, or $1,380 per student. Table 1 calculates these costs per program student in rows one through three, summed in row four.

Students in both research groups took courses over the five-year follow-up period. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System on instructional hours offered and total operating expenses at the four colleges provide an average cost per credit of $490 across those five years, which is used to calculate costs associated with course-taking. For the control group, approximately 47 credits attempted over five years represents a base cost of $23,160 per student. This is used as the base cost of course-taking in the absence of the program for both groups, as shown in the fifth row of Table 1. The next two rows show the indirect costs (in this case savings) associated with the change in course-taking patterns resulting from assignment to the DCMP program. The program group took nearly one less credit than the control group on average because of reduced developmental course-taking.[8] Assuming this reduction in credits attempted is priced between an upper bound of the average cost per credit of $490, and a lower bound of $0 per credit (that is, the marginal cost of half of the average cost), this means a social savings valued at $170 per student for the program group.[9] The indirect (or induced) costs are actually savings, but these do not all accrue to the colleges because of the associated loss of tuition and enrollment-based funding. However, some of these savings do accrue to the student. If program students took about one less developmental credit on average, their savings would average between $80 and $220 in tuition and fees, depending on district and state of residence.[10] Additionally, the opportunity cost of a student's time not spent on course work has value. For example, a student could recoup the economic value of time spent working, caring for a child, or in leisure time rather than in developmental coursework, for an estimated $420 in savings as shown in Table 1.[11]

The social cost of all program costs and savings is summed in the last row, and the third column shows the net difference between the costs per DCMP student (the program cost of DCMP plus the cost of developmental and college-level credits attempted) and the cost per student in the traditional developmental math sequence (the cost of developmental credits attempted and the cost of college-level credits attempted). This incremental cost of $790 highlights the difference between the cost of the status quo condition (the traditional developmental math sequence) and the cost of DCMP over the analysis follow-up period.

## Research Question 2: Cost per Outcome

A cost-effectiveness analysis expresses the costs of alternative interventions as costs per unit of a desired outcome. This cost-effectiveness analysis considers the cost for the primary outcomes, ever earned a credential or currently enrolled in a four-year college, and total college-level credits earned, which are drawn from the domains of academic progress and academic attainment (cumulative throughout the long-term follow-up period). Cost per

### TABLE 1. Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) Social Costs per Student

| Cost Category | Program Group | Control Group | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| DCMP start-up costs | 400 | 0 | 400 |
| Colleges' start-up costs | 770 | 0 | 770 |
| Colleges' steady-state operating costs | 210 | 0 | 210 |
| Cost of primary program components | 1,380 | 0 | 1,380 |
| Base cost: cost of credits attempted in the absence of the program[a] | 23,160 | 23,160 | 0 |
| Indirect cost: cost of additional credits attempted due to the program[b] | -170 | 0 | -170 |
| Indirect cost: cost of forgone student earnings due to the program | -420 | 0 | -420 |
| Net cost per group member over five years ($) | 23,950 | 23,160 | 790 |
| Sample size (total = 1,411) | 856 | 555 | |

*SOURCE: MDRC calculations using program-specific participation and budget data, transcript data, and financial and enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).*

*NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences. All dollar values have been rounded to the nearest $10 amount. Tests of statistical significance have only been performed on outcome measures, not costs. All outcomes are cumulative over five years.*

*All costs are shown in constant 2022 dollars.*

*[a]Base costs assume that program group students would have taken the same number of credits as control group students in the absence of the program.*

*[b]Indirect costs assume the marginal cost of course offerings equals 50 percent of the average cost as calculated from IPEDs total expenses and instructional hours.*

first college-level math course is not included in the cost-effectiveness analysis because it is most useful as an indicator of progress toward a degree, which is included. This paper's cost-effectiveness analysis expresses the cost of both the traditional math sequence and DCMP, per credential completion or four-year college enrollment and per college credit earned. The cost-effectiveness analysis compares the two alternatives to see which most efficiently produces those outcomes.

The key findings are:

- The costs per outcome were similar across research groups, with slightly lower costs per ***ever earning a credential or currently enrolled in a four-year college*** among DCMP group members, but slightly higher costs per ***credit earned***.

- The observed differences in cost effectiveness are the product of differences in average outcomes across research groups that are not statistically significant, which means that they could be the result of random chance and are not generalizable to other populations, settings, or times.

# Cost Effectiveness of DCMP After Five Years of Follow-Up

Table 2 presents calculations of the cost per outcome for college credits earned and degrees earned.[12]

## TABLE 2. Cost-Effectiveness Values

| Outcome | Program Group | Control Group | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Net cost per group member over five years ($) | 23,950 | 23,160 | 790 |
| Ever earned a credential or currently enrolled in a four-year college (%) | 32.7 | 30.2 | 2.5 |
| Cost per student who ever earned a credential or currently enrolled in a four-year college ($) | 73,240 | 76,690 | -3,450 |
| Total college-level credits earned | 30.7 | 30.3 | 0.4 |
| Cost per college-level credit earned ($) | 780 | 760 | 20 |
| Sample size (total = 1,411) | 856 | 555 | |

*SOURCE: MDRC calculations using program-specific outcome data, participation and budget data, transcript data, and financial and enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.*

*NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences. All dollar values have been rounded to the nearest $10 amount. Tests of statistical significance have only been performed on outcome measures, not costs. All outcomes are cumulative over five years.*
*All costs are shown in constant 2022 dollars.*

Among the program group, 32.7 percent of students ever earned any credential (for example, a certificate, or an associate's or bachelor's degree) or were currently enrolled in a four-year college at the end of five years. Among the control group, 30.2 percent of students had done so. However, this difference is not statistically significant. The cost per student who earned a credential or was currently enrolled in a four-year college by the end of five years was $73,240 for the program group and $76,690 for the control group. These costs include all costs associated with developmental and college-level course-taking for both groups, as well as DCMP program costs for the program group, divided by the proportion of students that completed any credential or were currently enrolled in a four-year college at the end of the five-year follow-up period. This savings is driven by current enrollment in a four-year college since there is no difference in averages between the groups for earning a degree or certificate, but there is a larger, albeit statistically insignificant difference, in the percentage of students enrolled in a four-year college across groups.[13] With an additional $790 spent on the program, and dividing by a 2.5 percentage point difference in earning credentials or being currently

enrolled in four-year colleges, each *additional* student who earned a credential or enrolled in a four-year college would cost $31,600, roughly half the average cost in the control group.[14]

On average, the program group had earned 30.7 college-level credits at the end of five years, while the control group had completed 30.3 college-level credits. Once again, this difference is not statistically significant. The cost per college credit earned was almost the same for both groups ($780 for program students and $760 for control group students) because the cost of the program was modest at $790 per student, and was partially offset by slightly fewer developmental courses being taken by those students.[15]

## Conclusion

The incremental cost of this early version of DCMP over five years was $790 per student when compared with status quo programing. Although it had positive effects on math course completion, it did not have any statistically significant effects on long-term academic outcomes. There are slightly lower costs per student with a credential or four-year enrollment in the program group, but the lack of statistical significance means the cost-effectiveness of the program is questionable. The difference in cost per college credit earned between the two groups is minimal. Therefore, for long-term outcomes there is no confirmed difference in the cost effectiveness between DCMP as it was implemented in this study and the status quo.

However, as an inexpensive program with short-term impacts, this early version of DCMP could potentially be bundled with a larger set of reforms without sacrificing their cost effectiveness. A synthesis of postsecondary evidence suggests that multi-component programs tend to have larger effects.[16] Furthermore, the steady-state cost is only a fraction of the total cost of the program at $210 per student, suggesting that if external funding can be secured to cover the $1,170 per student in start-up costs, colleges may be able to sustain DCMP thereafter. Importantly, students do not bear any costs of the program, and they accrue tuition savings from less time spent in developmental courses, as well as the opportunity to use that time for other purposes without having worse academic outcomes. These points make programs like this one, with math pathways and accelerated developmental sequences, worth considering as part of a strategy to foster student success.

# Notes and References

1. Xianglei Chen, *Remedial Coursetaking at U.S. Public 2- and 4-Year Institutions: Scope, Experience, and Outcomes* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, Department of Education, 2016).
2. Stewart Sheilynda, Doo Hun Lim, and JoHyun Kim, "Factors Influencing College Persistence for First Time Students," *Journal of Developmental Education* 38, 3 (2015): 12–20.
3. Elisabeth Barnett, Peter Bergman, Elizabeth Mary Kopko, Vikash T. Reddy, Clive Belfield, and Susha Roy, *Multiple Measures Placement Using Data Analytics: An Implementation and Early Impacts Report* (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2018); Shanna Smith Jaggars, Michelle Hodara, Sung-Woo Cho, and Di Xu, "Three Accelerated Developmental Education Programs: Features, Student Outcomes, and Implications," *Community College Review* 43, 1 (2014): 3–26; Angela Boatman, *Evaluating Institutional Efforts to Streamline Postsecondary Remediation: The Causal Effects of the Tennessee Developmental Course Redesign Initiative on Early Student Academic Success* (New York: National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2012); A. W. Logue, Mari Watanabe-Rose, and Daniel Douglas, D. "Should Students Assessed as Needing Remedial Mathematics Take College-Level Quantitative Courses Instead? A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 38, 3 (2016): 578–598; A. W. Logue, Daniel Douglas, and Mari Watanabe-Rose, "Corequisite Mathematics Remediation: Results Over Time and in Different Contexts," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 41, 3 (2019): 294–315; Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, Maria Scott Cormier, Dominique Dukes, and Diana E. Cruz Zamora, *The Changing Landscape of Developmental Education Practices: Findings from a National Survey and Interviews with Postsecondary Institutions* (New York: Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, 2019).
4. Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, Susan Sepanik, Victoria Deitch, Julia Raufman, Dominique Dukes, and Adnan Moussa, *Gaining Ground: Findings from the Dana Center Mathematics Pathways Impact Study* (New York: Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, 2019).
5. This social (or societal) cost calculation includes costs borne by the Dana Center, the college, the government (via financial aid and college funding), and the student.
6. See Figure 2.2 in Zachry Rutschow et al. (2019).
7. See Zachry Rutschow et al. (2019) for a full description of each cost category summarized here. The per-student numbers cited in the subsequent bullets are the result of multiplying costs from each category by the four participating colleges and the two years of program operation where applicable, then dividing by the 856 students offered the program and rounding to the nearest $10 amount. Supplement Tables S.1–S.3 provide further details on the cost components for each category.
8. The program group took an average of 39.9 college-level credits and 6.5 developmental credits, while the control group took an average of 39.5 college-level credits and 7.6 developmental credits over five years.
9. This assumes that the marginal costs of instruction equal 50 percent of the average costs. Lower marginal costs of instruction would make DCMP slightly more expensive per outcome, while higher marginal costs would make it slightly less expensive. Developmental courses are assumed to cost the same as college-level courses per credit offered. While developmental courses may have lower faculty costs, this may be offset by smaller class sizes.
10. Tuition is approximately $100 per credit for Texas students, but lower for in-county students, and higher for out-of-state students. Tuition does not cover all college costs, so tuition savings do not equal social savings.
11. This assumes the student spends 15 class hours per credit, and an additional 15 hours of study, at the median Texas wage of $20 per hour.
12. All outcome estimates and statistical significance presented in this section come from Susan Sepanik and Sukanya Barman, "Long-Term Effects of the Dana Center Math Pathways Model: Evidence from a Randomized Trial" (New York: MDRC, 2023).

13. Not shown in this table. See Sepanik and Barman (2023).
14. This is calculated using the Incremental Cost Effectiveness Ratio (ICER), a measure of the average incremental cost associated with one additional unit of an outcome.
    ICER = (C1 – C0) / (E1 – E0)
    Where C1 is the cost of the program; C0 is the cost of the status quo; E1 and E0 are the estimates of outcomes from the program and control group, respectively.
15. ICER estimates suggest that the small increase for the program group (0.4 credits on average) would cost $1,980 per additional credit, which is roughly three times the average cost per credit in the control group.
16. Michael J. Weiss, Howard S. Bloom, and Kriti Singh, "What 20 Years of MDRC RCTs Suggest About Predictive Relationships Between Intervention Features and Intervention Impacts for Community College Students," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, (2022).

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