

# Lacking basics, some get extra help in college

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Students in Nancy Wood's remedial reading class at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock begin each semester reading the novel *The Cay*.

Theodore Taylor's book for preteens tells of an 11-year-old white boy stranded on a small island with a black West Indian man.

It will be the first book many

of the students ever read, Wood said.

"This is a young adult novel, and I make no apologies for this," she told students on the first day of class Tuesday. "I'm not trying to insult you by reading this."

The 144-page book is well-written and addresses racism, a subject that stimulates class discussion, said Wood, who has taught remedial reading at

UALR for 19 years. Piquing students' interest is key.

Thousands of Arkansas college students are taking non-credit math, reading and English courses this fall. Called various names — remedial, developmental or transitional — the courses are designed to close the gap between what students learned in high school and what they need to know for college.

See **BASICS**, Page 3B

# Basics

• Continued from Page 1B

The latest figures from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education show 52.6 percent, or 9,913 students, took at least one remedial class in fall 2006 because of their low scores on college entrance exams.

That’s down from 54.8 percent in 2005, but education officials said the number will grow as the number of Arkansans seeking a college degree grows.

The state is working to increase its number of college graduates. Just 19 percent of adults over age 25 in Arkansas hold a bachelor’s degree, ranking ahead of only West Virginia.

“As Arkansas reaches out to a broader cross section of the population, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue a college degree, more students will have developmental needs,” said David Belcher, provost at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Educators statewide are wrestling with the issue, trying to help remedial students become successful college students and to decrease the number of future remedial students coming through the public school system.

Several colleges and universities are revising their remedial programs.

The Arkansas Legislative Task Force on Higher Education, Remediation, Retention and Graduation Rates has the task of evaluating the problem’s scope, identifying its causes and developing a written plan to improve remediation. The group, created during the 2007 legislative session, held its first meeting last week.

Officials in education at all levels said they must work together for a solution.

#### THE STUDENTS

Students in Wood’s class stood one after the other to introduce themselves Tuesday. There were accounting, computer science, criminal justice and nursing majors. Students came from Little Rock, El Dorado, Dallas and Nigeria.

Many students read at a ninth- or 10th-grade level and say they hate reading, Wood said.

UALR freshman Jackie Glover, 19, graduated from Little Rock’s Parkview High School this spring. A business major, Glover said she enjoys reading, but she isn’t good at standardized exams.

“I’m not a good test-taker, so I wasn’t surprised I had to take this class,” Glover said.

Jessica Touchet took Wood’s class this spring along with remedial writing and math. Touchet, a certified nursing assistant, said the classes helped her prepare for college.

“I’m 40 years old, I haven’t been in school for 20 years or so,” said Touchet, who plans to go on to study occupational therapy at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway.

There’s no shame in taking remedial courses, she said. “It really helps you through school. If you can’t grasp this, you won’t be able to grasp other courses like history or geography that you have to take that will be much harder.”

Karen Hodges, director of remediation and special retention activities at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, said, “Everyone develops in their own way and in their own time.”

Her remedial reading students will spend much of the semester reading and discussing selections from college textbooks covering such subjects as algebra, history and chemistry.

“I’ll push you to be critical readers,” Hodges told students Thursday.

More students need remedial math than remedial English or reading, said Michael Gealt, dean of the College of Science and Mathematics at UALR.

Of the 18,838 remedial students in Arkansas in fall 2006, 44.9 percent needed remedial math, compared with 31.6 percent for English and 29.2 percent for reading.

In instructor Tracy Watson’s remedial math class at UALR, students begin the semester by brushing up on fractions, exponents, square roots and solving basic equations.

“We start off with basics to help ease them into what we’re doing later on,” said Watson, an instructor at UALR for seven years. “Once they get past the attitude of ‘I can’t do this,’ they learn they can do it if they work hard.”

Watson said she tries to give students problems that show how they will use math in their everyday lives, such as calculating interest earned from a bank account.

#### RESTRUCTURING

UA-Fayetteville revamped its remedial math and reading programs after Hodges was hired in July 2006 to oversee the overall remedial program and decrease the number of UA students leaving college after their freshman year.

The new math curriculum has more step-by-step instruction and

## Number of students remediated

*The number of first-time freshmen required to take remedial courses at the state’s colleges and universities dropped by 2.2 percent in the fall of 2006. Listed are the figures for selected public universities and the totals for four-year and two-year schools.*

Institution	MATHEMATICS Fall 2006		ENGLISH Fall 2006		READING Fall 2006	
Public Four-Year	Tested*	Remediated	Tested*	Remediated	Tested*	Remediated

SOURCE: Arkansas Department of Higher Education

the new reading curriculum incorporates reading from several disciplines to give students practice to help them in other classes, Hodges said.

UA has the lowest remediation rate in the state. Last fall 8.9 percent of freshmen needed remedial math, 5.8 percent needed remedial English and 5.9 percent needed remedial reading.

But entering college with skill deficiencies puts students at a disadvantage. They’re trying to catch up on skills they should already have, said Paula Bradberry, director of first-year studies at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro.

Of the 1,727 ASU students needing remediation in fall 2006, 39.4 percent needed math, 28 percent needed English and 25.2 percent needed reading.

The university restructured its remedial reading program in spring 2006. Students who made a 15 or less on the American Col-

lege Test reading section now take two semesters of remedial reading. Students who score 16, 17 or 18 take one semester.

ASU also incorporated computers into remedial math courses, which allows students to get immediate feedback as they practice solving problems.

Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock is redesigning its remedial courses with new technology, said Rashunda Johnson, dean of education and academic success. New remedial reading and writing courses began this semester using new computer software, and college officials are studying ways to revise the math program.

Of the 1,018 students needing remedial courses last fall, 81.4 percent needed math, 56.4 percent needed English and 52 percent needed reading. Many are adults returning to school after several years in the work force.

#### THE SCORES

State law requires students to take remedial courses in English, reading or math if they score less than 19 in those subjects on the ACT or an equivalent college entrance exam.

The state’s cumulative ACT score of 20.5 this year was up from 20.3 five years ago. The cumulative national score this year was 21.2.

dents at the Arkansas School for Mathematics, Science and the Arts, a residential school for high school juniors and seniors in Hot Springs, had an average ACT score of 28.2.

The average score was 22.2 in the Conway School District, 19.5 in the Little Rock district and 22 in the Rogers district.

In the North Little Rock district, the composite score was 20.1. While that district’s score was up just one-tenth of a point from last year, the number of students taking the ACT grew from 320 last year to 376 this year, said Rhonda Dickey, the district’s administrative director of secondary education. The more students taking the exam, the harder it is to improve scores.

The average Arkansas student scored 20.9 in reading, 19.9 in math and 20.2 in science.

Scores varied statewide. Stu-

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette