New Math Courses in Keene Aim to Help Community College Degree-seekers

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Two locals schools are teaming up to offer community college students a chance to catch up on their math without falling behind on their finances.

River Valley Community College and Keene Community Education, the adult education branch of the Keene School District, are partnering to offer low-cost remedial, also called developmental, math classes this spring to students who need extra work before starting college-level courses.

A majority of community college students across the country are required to spend time and tuition on developmental education courses to bring their skills up to par with college-level work. But studies show a low rate of certificate or degree completion for students who take remedial coursework.

This new partnership aims to help more students reach that goal, Keene Community Education Director Janice H. Barry said. Keene Community Education will use grant money to offer developmental math courses to River Valley students at a reduced cost.

Nationwide, about 60 percent of community college students enroll in at least one developmental education course, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

At River Valley, about 85 percent of students need to take at least one remedial math course, based on their performance on a placement test, before being ready to start on their coursework, according to Leigh Marthe, director for instructional services at River Valley.

But when students take too many developmental classes, their federal student aid starts to run out — prolonging, and, in some cases, stopping students from earning a degree.

So cost to students was a big factor in pushing for these types of partnerships, said Art Ellison, director of the Bureau of Adult Education at the N.H. Department of Education.

“For (federal) Pell grants, there’s a five-year limit, and the clock starts ticking the minute they enroll,” he said.
Developmental courses run between $500 and $700, depending on the course and location, he said. By contrast, most adult education courses cost between $125 and $150.

At River Valley, fundamentals of math 1 and 2, which equals four credits, could set a student back $1,000, once support materials are factored in, Marthe said.

The community college and adult education partnership is a strategy community colleges across the state are looking into, Ellison said. Nashua and Great Bay community colleges have already designed programs.

Students have to complete 64 credits to earn an associate degree, and it’s not uncommon for students to spend a semester or two taking developmental courses. Students can take up to 13 credits of developmental courses, Marthe said.

With this new partnership in Keene, students might be able to cut out four of those credits and instead put that money toward credits that count toward their degree.

Incoming students as well as students who are enrolled in other River Valley courses but struggling with math can take the courses. Marthe said she’s already referred 10 students to the program, which is scheduled to start in the spring.

The schools can offer the courses through a $10,000 federal grant managed by Keene Community Education that pays for a teacher for two semesters. The grant, called the College Transitions Grant, is supposed to help send students to colleges.

The classes will be free to graduates of Keene High School or Keene Community Education, Barry said. The courses will be held at River Valley’s Keene Academic Center, an added bonus, she said.

“Students come to feel comfortable in that environment, meet college staff and envision their future,” she said.

In the future, there’s potential to expand the partnership to offer developmental classes in other subjects, such as English or science. But math is the most common developmental course needed, Barry and Marthe said.

Keene Community Education is holding a College Transitions orientation evening on Jan. 21 at 6 p.m. Potential students can learn more about the classes and take a free placement test. Call the office at 357-0088 to register or go to www.keenecommunityed.org