Remedial education is being fast-tracked, served up in bite-sized pieces, and made more relevant to students' career goals as states and community colleges experiment with ways to keep them from getting discouraged and dropping out, according to a new report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

The report stops short of recommending any specific strategies, leaving that up to a national remediation-research center that will open next year with up to $10-million in funds over five years from the U.S. Department of Education. Proposals for the center, which was announced in May, were due last week.

The need for such a center is clear, the report's authors say. About 42 percent of entering community-college students enroll in at least one remedial class in mathematics, reading, or writing, and less than a quarter of those students complete a degree or certificate within eight years, the report notes.

It highlights a number of new strategies, meanwhile, that seem to hold promise.

In Texas, Virginia, and Washington, three states that have been revamping remedial, or developmental, education, some colleges are compressing two semesters of instruction into one, an approach that can help some students progress faster. But at the same time, the authors say, it can leave the least-prepared students floundering.

Other strategies cited in the report include providing remediation in small modules, so that students study only what they need to get up to the college level. And offering students a tutorial before their placement test could help some avoid being placed in the noncredit classes altogether, the report notes.
The report is based on a yearlong study that included input from 10 community colleges in Texas, Virginia, and Washington, as well as one in California. The authors also consulted with national education experts and nonprofit and research groups.

**Proven Results?**

One of the biggest obstacles that the colleges encountered in efforts to improve remedial education, the authors found, was a lack of solid research on what leads to improvements, and for whom.

"A lot of these initiatives are pretty early on, and there isn't enough data to know which students they work with and whether they're scalable," said Melissa Emrey-Arras, a director with the Government Accountability Office and the report's lead author. "Faculty are more likely to buy into it when these strategies are tested and proven effective."

That response frustrates those who say there's no time to wait.

The advocacy group Complete College America has been pushing states to enact policies aimed at helping more students graduate, and reducing time spent in remedial education is high on its list of priorities.

"I was disappointed that there wasn't more of a sense of urgency in the report," said Stan Jones, president of the nonprofit group, which receives much of its support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "Federal research projects can take four to five years to complete, and we're failing significant numbers of students now."

Plenty of research available from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, said Mr. Jones, documents successful strategies. His group has been promoting some of those strategies as it travels around the country to meet with policy makers.
Patti Levine-Brown, president of the National Association for Developmental Education, said she hoped the new center would end up at an institution with researchers who have spent time in the trenches.

"There are a lot of people doing work in the field who don't understand what practitioners go through every day in the classroom," said Ms. Levine-Brown, who is also a professor of communications at Florida State College at Jacksonville. "One size does not fit all, and the more strategies we can come up with to help students succeed, the better."