Accelerating Developmental Education: The Case for Collaboration

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from *Inquiry*, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2004

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Abstract
This writer offers alternatives to the traditional sixteen-week ADDACOURSE solution for students who need developmental education.

I began thinking about the need for collaboration in developmental education many years ago when I was working at a university in Ohio. I had a student named Mary who was the night cleaning lady in the building where I worked. Mary had grown up on the streets of Detroit and now had two children. She had dropped out of high school but managed to obtain a GED.

I always worked late and, as a result, I got to talk to Mary frequently. I found that Mary's ambition in life was to be a college student.

As it turned out, that's what I did for a living. I found disadvantaged students who wanted to go to college, organized ways to get them in, and provided support once they arrived. So Mary soon became a part-time student at the university. She had all sorts of weaknesses, but she was as highly motivated as any student I've ever seen. And she slowly worked her way through two developmental math courses and a developmental writing course.

A year later she was through her freshman year with a 2.5 grade point average before life caught up with her. Without going into all of the details, Mary might have been successful if someone had just been able to come up with a couple of thousand dollars to pay her children's medical bills. She might have been successful if we'd had a way to provide day care for her children. But I couldn't find a way. And so we lost Mary.

An anonymous poet once wrote, "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these… it might have been."

Since then I've spent a lot of time pondering what we might have done differently. It's troubled me for more than two decades. But I think I may have found some answers.

I want to propose two major ideas for consideration: 1) that we need to re-conceptualize how we go about delivering developmental education, and 2) that we need to collaborate more fully with others in doing it.

Right now, teaching developmental courses in English, reading, and mathematics represents a substantial portion of what we do in this field. All of the public community colleges in Virginia assess their students upon entry. Based on this assessment, they typically consign, on the average, 45 percent of these students to one or more developmental courses. That means that almost half of the community college students in Virginia spend at least a semester in developmental courses.

The good news is that the majority of these students pass their developmental courses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 70 percent of those placing into developmental education pass these courses within a year. And a majority of these students move on and pass the courses in their curriculum. According to the National Study of Developmental Education, about 75 percent of those who pass the highest-level developmental course and take the college transfer course in that subject pass that course.

The bad news is that a significant minority of students never get past developmental education. No matter how we crunch the numbers, we lose at least 30 percent of our developmental students every year.

They leave because they never acquire the skills necessary to pass developmental courses. Pat Cross estimates that about 10 percent of the students who place into the lowest levels of developmental courses lack the academic wherewithal to succeed in college.

They leave because they get bored with having to take developmental courses. I visited a college recently where students who placed into the most basic level of developmental mathematics had to take eighteen hours of math courses before they could even get in to the college transfer mathematics class. Almost 90 percent of those who placed in the lowest level of developmental math dropped out before taking the first college transfer mathematics course.

They leave because they use up their financial aid taking developmental courses and incur increasing debt loads in order to attend college. A recent study in the *Community College Review* indicated that students with high debt loads are 8 percent more likely than other students to drop out.

They leave because life interferes with college attendance. Among those who leave college, almost half cite personal or family problems as a reason for their departure. In fact, unresolved personal and family problems represent the major cause of attrition in American higher education.

But I should point out that no discussion of student attrition would be complete without some mention of what researchers have called "positive attrition." Some of our students get job offers that are so good, they can't afford to stay in college. I was at Austin Community College a few years ago and noticed that flyers were stuck under the windshield wipers of student cars in the parking lot. The flyers were from a local technology firm offering students $25 an hour if they'd had two courses in computer programming. This was at a campus where adjunct faculty with masters degrees were making $21 an hour.

Unfortunately, in spite of positive attrition, the bottom line is that an unacceptably high percentage of developmental students become attrition statistics for the wrong reasons. *And I'd like to suggest that, when it comes to improving students' learning skills, one size does not fit all.*

As I noted earlier, of the almost half of our entering students identified as underprepared, close to 100 percent of them are placed in sixteen-week developmental courses. Yet we have utterly no reason to believe that spending sixteen weeks in a developmental course is the best solution for *all* of these students. It's simply the solution that's most efficient and economical for our colleges and universities.

Stockpiling all the students who fall below a certain cut-off score on our assessment instruments in developmental courses is only one of many solutions to the problem of under-preparedness. But it's the one solution that everyone seems to use. As Parker Palmer once said, "College faculty always apply the same solution to whatever problems they confront… it's called *addacourse.*" If students have trouble writing, we add a freshman writing course. If students have trouble thinking, they add a critical thinking course. Presumably, if students have bad manners, we should add an etiquette course to the curriculum.

And, unfortunately, a sixteen-week developmental course may not be the best solution for all students. The top 5 percent of developmental writing students, for instance, could probably go right into the college transfer English course if they had regular tutorial assistance from a writing laboratory. Highly motivated adult students who've been away from schooling for a while and place into the higher levels of developmental math might catch up with a five-week intensive refresher course in mathematics. Recent high school graduates with low motivation might profit from learning communities that combine developmental classes with college transfer classes.

I work on the assumption that – as measured by assessment tests – developmental students comprise the bottom half of the distribution of college students. So when I'm discussing alternatives to developmental courses, I'm talking about the top half of the bottom half of college students. The bottom half of the bottom half of college students will still probably need the structure and organization imposed by a sixteen-week course. I don't think we'll ever get away from the need to offer the classic sixteen-week developmental course to a large number of students. However, we could reduce that number substantially by applying other solutions.

My own list of the top alternatives to the standard sixteen-week, stand-alone developmental course includes the following:

- Number five: regularly-scheduled mandatory participation in tutoring;
- Number four: aggressive use of individualized learning laboratories or learning assistance programs;
- Number three: targeted supplemental instruction to support difficult courses;
- Number two: integrated learning in skills instruction in all courses; and
- Number one: widespread adoption of learning communities for developmental students.

The problem is that most of the time these alternatives to typical developmental course are provided randomly. The solution is to do what we're already doing in a more purposeful and systematic way.

What I refer to as accelerated developmental education involves four things. First, in order to get more effective use of alternatives to developmental courses, we have to do a more complete job of assessment. Second, we have to do a more intensive job of advising. Third, we have to expand our use of alternatives to developmental courses. And overriding all of these, we have to do a better job of collaboration with our colleagues within and without the institution.

Assessment

Let's begin with expanding our assessment. Right now, every college and university in Virginia requires students to undergo some form of cognitive assessment. Cognitive assessment measures students' intellectual capacities, how well they read or write, or how many and what kind of math problems they can solve. Most of our assessment instruments do a pretty good job of placing students accurately along some continuum of academic skills.

However, the vast majority of our institutions don't do a particularly good job of assessing students' non-cognitive or affective characteristics. Affective characteristics include motivation, autonomy, or anxiety. In most cases, we either don't assess these student characteristics upon entry at all or, if we do, we fail to use the information effectively in advising or use them for some purpose other than advising.

I suggest that every institution offering developmental courses and their alternatives add one or more non-cognitive instruments to their assessment battery. I recommend that we assess the most important affective characteristics:

- Students' help seeking behavior
- Students' academic anxiety
- Students' academic self-confidence or self-efficacy
- Students' autonomy
- Students' motivation for learning.

Once we have data on these student characteristics, we will not only know *what* students need to learn but *how* they can learn it best. A student with high motivation and strong help-seeking behaviors can probably succeed in credit-level courses with a lot of tutoring and individualized instruction. A student with low motivation, high anxiety, and poor help seeking skills will need the discipline, the structure, and the support of one or more developmental courses.

There are a number of instruments that measure these characteristics. I recommend the following:

- Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (available from H & H Publishers),

- Study Behavior Inventory (available from Andragogy Associates),

- The Canfield Learning Styles Inventory (available from Western Psychological Associates), or

- The "How do I learn best inventory" (available on line from VARK).

Each of these instruments has both a computerized and a paper-and-pencil version that can be added to whatever assessment battery a college currently uses. Most of these instruments will add no more than half an hour to the

assessment battery.

Advising

Once advisors have data from both cognitive and affective assessment, they can use this information to do a more precise job of placing students. But this will require the re-training of academic advisors. Currently, advisors use cognitive data to place students in courses. In accelerated developmental education, they should use a combination of cognitive and affective data to place students in appropriate developmental *experiences* — sometimes including courses and sometimes not.

Alternatives to Developmental Courses

In accelerated developmental education, the activities we now do as experiments or innovations become part of the institutional menu for developmental education. In accelerated developmental education, these activities are part of a systematic response to student underpreparedness. Supplemental Instruction is applied strategically to the courses in which developmental students typically have the most difficulty. Tutoring is applied specifically to students who are most likely to profit from it. Learning communities and paired courses are not just an experiment, but an integral part of the continuum of developmental education intervention. College orientation or master student courses are provided to those who need them most and are bypassed by students who don't need them.

Collaboration

In order for this to happen, the process of advising students into learning experiences rather than into courses is going to require collaboration – between student affairs personnel, advisors, and faculty. One of the primary purposes of this collaboration is to identify the student profiles that call for different types of intervention.

Because no one is yet doing this, we don't yet know what profiles require which interventions. Our faculty and advisors and student affairs professionals will have to develop different theoretical profiles that call for different interventions. Having done this, they will also have to work together to validate placement based on these profiles. This will require a great deal of collaboration.

Advisors, faculty, and institutional research officers, for instance, will have to work together to validate placement. Faculty and advisors will have to work together to re-conceptualize the advising process. Counselors will have to work with advisors and faculty to make sure everyone understands what scores on cognitive and affective assessment instruments mean. In fact, collaboration will be the key to accelerated developmental education.

It may be that some support will have to be coordinated through community agencies. If our students have serious cognitive and affective difficulties, then the worst thing we can do for them is allow them to spend only six hours a week on campus taking two developmental courses. It's highly unlikely that six hours a week of courses in 168 hours a week of life are going to make much difference for our neediest students. We need to make it possible for our neediest students to spend more time at our institutions.

Our neediest students take only a course or two and miss many classes in the courses they do take. That's because they require legal aid, day care, social services, and advice on everything from managing money to preparing nutritious meals. We have to arrange the provision of services outside our institutions for many of our students if we expect them to take full advantage of what we offer.

And so collaboration with community agencies is also an important part of accelerated developmental education because it helps our neediest students buy time that we can use to encourage them to build their skills and become vested in the collegiate experience.

Obviously, we can't ask colleges to provide all the social support services our students need to become successful in college. But we all live in communities where these services are provided. I believe we need to form partnerships with community agencies that provide these services so that life for them can become less of a burden and college can become more of a respite and a haven.

If we're to accelerate the process of developmental education, we need to buy time for students to profit from what we have to offer. We can't do this ourselves; we have to collaborate with others.

Life after Developmental Studies

Three years ago I attended my daughter's graduation from a university in Ohio. I stayed at the local Holiday Inn and I had some problems during my stay, so I asked to speak to the manager as I checked out. An African-American woman was summoned to the desk and I explained to her that the hot water didn't work. So she asked me who I was, and when I told her, she yelled and practically leaped over the counter and said, "Hunter, you remember me… I'm Mary."

It turns out that she went back to Detroit, transferred her credits to Wayne Community College, got a degree in hospitality management, and was now managing a Holiday Inn in Ohio.

Suddenly, it meant a lot less to me that the hot water hadn't worked that day.

I want to reiterate, in the words of Mark Twain, the "Calm confidence of a Christian with four aces," that there is life after developmental education. And if we teach our students nothing else than how to write a little better or read with a bit more comprehension or use college and community services with greater wisdom, we will have done our job – because our students will carry that knowledge with them throughout their lives.

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