

# Perspectives

Community College  
Leadership for the  
21st Century

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## The Dilemma of Developmental Education

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Change seems to be the new constant regarding our country's educational systems – at every level. Major changes in K-12 are, in part, a result of the new Common Core, which is intended to eliminate the need for developmental education. The standards of the new Common Core are excellent and seem to align with and exceed the “college-ready indicators” assessed on current college placement tests. However, developmental education is not going away anytime soon.

Recent studies such as those of CCRC, Mattorell and McFarlin, and Calcagno and Long have made the claim that developmental education doesn't work. The studies assert that students who just missed the cut for college-level and took remedial courses did not fare any better than those who just made the cut. As Hunter Boylan noted, “The point of remedial classes is to level the playing field for underprepared students...not to enable them to outperform.” All three of the studies failed to take into account those students who scored significantly below the cut. Also, they did not consider the wide-range of abilities for developmental education students and the multiple barriers regarding their access and completion when making the determination that developmental education is not effective. Coupled with the constant criticism regarding the horrendous cost of developmental education – \$2 billion, or 3% of the annual higher education budget – colleges and even entire states are eliminating mandatory developmental education as a cost-saving measure. This action is analogous to throwing out the baby with the bath-water – along with the soap, the tub and the towel. Perhaps the right questions are not being asked regarding the data collected.

These recent studies regarding developmental education's “effectiveness” can be compared with those that are focused on global ranking. For example, one of many reports claims, “Our education system is falling behind other countries by many measures. As of 2010, American students ranked 17th in science and 25th in math, surpassed by students in countries like China, Poland, and Canada.” Is this an honest comparison? In many countries, students who are non-achievers or who don't have the cognitive capacity to perform and complete higher-level work are pulled out of the school systems. The USA has an open-door educational system where EVERYONE counts. When academic achievements are compared world-wide, the USA is sharing the success rates of ALL students, while some other countries are only reporting the high-achieving students since the lower achieving students have been filtered out. Further, within the last ten years, an increasing number of students in the USA with documented learning disabilities,

as well as those previously not encouraged to attend college, now enroll. Does this mean we should ignore the studies and reports on ranking? Of course not, but it does mean that we should see the bigger picture to more accurately reflect on exactly what is being compared. Like global educational comparisons, studies on the efficacy of developmental education require further examination.

There are so many factors to student achievement over which the government, K-12 schools, and colleges will never have control. We have been dependent on the metric of grades to inform researchers and decision makers whether developmental education is successful. Grades alone cannot speak for many of our students; they aren't telling our students' stories. As developmental educators know, success isn't just about cognitive factors. Twelve years of K12 non-success rarely can be

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fixed in one postsecondary semester. However, based on current studies, developmental educators are being held to that standard. Those in the trenches realize that the intervention provided by developmental education often becomes an astounding turning/saving point for many students. The success of developmental education cannot be measured by an isolated 2.0 GPA. Moreover, studies have yet to consistently answer: Are students' low pass rates the result of poor teaching, poor curriculum design, or the result of students not attending, not completing, or inability to complete the work? Additional variables to consider in future studies to help compensate for current research flaws include:

**Student barriers to success** may include factors such as lack of transportation, extensive work hours, sick children and/or lack of childcare. Personal factors such as single parenthood with no spousal support, spousal abuse, homelessness, learning disabilities, illiteracy or reading below the 3rd grade level, and classroom absences due to substance abuse/recovery and associated legal issues also can become barriers. Thus, we may ask: Is it fair to compare the success of such at-risk students with those who are less at-risk, using the same timelines and expectations?

**The overall effectiveness of developmental education** requires institutionalized, college-wide support practices, such as:

*(continued on page 4)*

*Developmental education is most successful when it is considered a campus-wide priority. [This] requires that the college's administrators aggressively and persistently promote developmental education.*

– Hunter S. Boylan

*The developmental education reform process is fraught with challenges, but the stakes are too high not to pursue it aggressively. Thoughtful implementation of reforms provides opportunities for community colleges to increase their organizational capacity and build on the benefits of reforms.*

– Nikki Edgecombe et al.

## Alliance Leadership Academy

To be held at  
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## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Nationally, community colleges struggle to support, retain, and graduate growing numbers of academically under-prepared students. To achieve these goals, colleges must discover how to improve the poor outcomes of students referred to developmental education since research indicates students who complete their developmental education requirements are four times more likely to graduate from college than those who do not. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

### Barb Bouthillier, M.A.

Faculty, Grand Rapids Community College  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

While community colleges are making valiant efforts at addressing the needs of the growing numbers of academically under-prepared students, it is clear that there are still too many student hours and dollars spent in developmental education that often do not lead to completion of a degree or certificate. As we face this challenge, we need to work together to better understand the issues and implement meaningful change.

**Collaboration:** K-12 and post-secondary institutions need to align expectations for college preparedness. This collaboration must include alignment of content as well as expectations of dispositions toward learning. This is a cyclical issue. College preparedness depends on secondary school preparation; secondary school preparation depends on elementary school preparation; elementary and secondary school preparation depend upon teacher preparation. This brings the cycle full-circle and all parties need to be on the same page.

*[C]ommunity colleges need to be willing and able to move more quickly to minimize hindrances and maximize best practices.*

**Research:** Colleges need a more detailed understanding of what contributes to persistence and completion of developmental courses for some students and what obstacles hinder persistence and completion of these same courses for other students. Follow up with non-persisting, as well as persisting students is key to this understanding. Although research with non-persisting students is challenging, we need a more complete understanding of the reasons students stop-out and drop-out.

**Change:** Based on this understanding, community colleges need to be willing and able to move more quickly to minimize hindrances and maximize best practices. Such change requires that faculty and administration work together with a common mission. Higher education is known to be slow to change; to meet this challenge we need to work together to implement policy and program changes more swiftly.

**Mindset:** A key ingredient in all three of these areas is mindset. Just as we must help students to believe in themselves, face the challenges, and persist, K-16 educators need a growth mindset. We need to realize we have the ability to meet the challenge of supporting, retaining, and graduating the growing number of under-prepared students and then take on the hard work of making it happen.

Barb Bouthillier is an instructor in Developmental Mathematics and Psychology at Grand Rapids Community College. After earning an M.A. in Counseling Psychology from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, she spent ten years in student development, serving as Assistant Dean, then working in residence life and counseling at Calvin College and the University of Utah. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in the DCCL program at Ferris State University and plans to continue partnering with those who are working to close the achievement gap.



### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What measures can leaders take to create meaningful improvements in developmental education to nurture eventual student success?**

### Pamela Lau, M.A.

Dean, Parkland College  
Champaign, Illinois

Developmental education is at a crossroads. Data point to the paucity of positive outcomes in its programs. Too many students start in remediation, too few enter college-level programs, and even fewer - less than 10% - graduate within three years of entering college. Community colleges must either make concerted efforts to reform or acknowledge that the open door is no more than a hollow, albeit idealistic, promise.

Leaders reviewing policy and programming may wish to consider changes in the following areas:

**Assessment:** Current placement tests measure only one dimension of college readiness – basic academic skills demonstrated at the time of taking the test. Recent research indicates that non-cognitive factors such as time management, study-skills, commitment, and tenacity (popularly called “grit”) have a significant influence on student success. Colleges should revisit their concepts of college readiness, review assessments of readiness, and prepare high school seniors for assessments to prevent unnecessary routing through developmental education.

**Acceleration:** Traditional prerequisite approaches to developmental education require students to complete pre-college course sequences before taking college-level classes. Colleges are now finding success with co-requisite models: students who score near the minimum required for entry into college courses are placed directly into college-level classes with additional instructional support, thus reducing time spent in remediation.

**Support:** Helping students navigate collegiate requirements and expectations and learn self-management of non-academic issues must be part of meaningful reform. Comprehensive First Year Experience (FYE) programs can address these concerns holistically. FYE should include assessment preparation, mandatory orientation and advisement, student success courses, academic coaching, and long-term educational planning. Effective FYE programs require partnerships between academic affairs and student services.

**Curriculum and pedagogy:** Reform must address teaching and learning in the classroom. Traditional stand-alone drill-skills approaches have not facilitated student learning, and, worse, sapped student motivation. Bold steps are needed to re-design curriculum and pedagogy with student learning at the center. Contextualized learning models which teach basic skills in the context of specific disciplines or career programs show promise for improving student learning, persistence, and motivation and should be seriously explored as part of meaningful reform.

Pam Lau earned her M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. She has served as a developmental education faculty member, reading program director, and Director of the Center for Academic Success at Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, prior to assuming her current role of Dean of Academic Services at Parkland. She chairs the Developmental Education Council and provides leadership for First Year Experience. Pam is seeking her doctorate in the Ferris State University's DCCL program.



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Nationally, community colleges struggle to support, retain, and graduate growing numbers of academically under-prepared students. To achieve these goals, colleges must discover how to improve the poor outcomes of students referred to developmental education since research indicates students who complete their developmental education requirements are four times more likely to graduate from college than those who do not. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

### Selling Four C's to Quality Developmental Education

**D. Patrick Saxon, Ed.D., MBA**

Director, Sam Houston State University  
Developmental Education Administration Doctoral Program  
Executive Board Member, National Association for Developmental Education

About 60% of high school graduates enroll in developmental courses upon their entry to community college (Smith Jaggars, Hodara, & Stacey, 2013). Developmental education professionals know the risks their students face along the path to college success. However, they also know what it takes to provide students with the best opportunity to prepare for college level academics. To those who haven't studied or worked directly in developmental education, the term may be considered a euphemism and the practice may be defined simply as "remediation" through precollege courses. However, scholars and professionals in the field know better and it is our job to advocate that programs operate characteristically according to the following "four C's."

**Committed.** As a researcher and consultant in the field, I've learned that the common denominator in high quality developmental programs is committed institutional leadership. If the administration wants quality developmental education, it is more likely that the college will have it. A college president committed to serving this significant population will acknowledge the importance of developmental students as its future graduates. He or she will make a public commitment to the developmental program, affirming its importance with words, actions, and resources. As advocates for our students, we should inform our leaders of the significance and importance of developmental education on our campuses.

*Developmental course instructors and support service professionals need a formal means of coordination in order to work together effectively.*

**Comprehensive.** A great challenge for our field is a lack of understanding about the range of services that contribute to student success. A definition by Boylan helps us understand that there is more to developmental education than simply offering remedial courses. He states, "Developmental education is the integration of academic courses and support services guided by the principles of adult learning and development" (NCDE, 2014, p.1). An array of course options and services must be in place in order to offer appropriate academic and affective support. Our college leaders need to know that a comprehensive developmental education solution includes:

- ◆ assessment services to determine student academic skills, lifestyle, and affective factors for the purpose of course placement,
- ◆ counseling and advising services,
- ◆ the integration of study skills into the curriculum,
- ◆ the integration of academic support services,
- ◆ culturally responsive instruction and mentoring, and
- ◆ options for traditional and accelerated models of instruction

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What measures can leaders take to create meaningful improvements in developmental education to nurture eventual student success?*

delivered by the highest quality teachers.

**Coordinated.** Developmental course instructors and support service professionals need a formal means of coordination in order to work together effectively. A program coordinator needs to be in place to oversee the broad range of activities involved in the delivery of developmental education. The coordinator will offer advice and guidance, and facilitate personnel in their endeavors to work together and improve practice. Some (but by no means all) program areas and activities that must operate in tandem and thus need coordination are:

- ◆ assessment testing and advising services for placement purposes,
- ◆ course instruction and support services integration,
- ◆ developmental and college level course curriculum alignment, and
- ◆ program goal-setting and evaluation studies.

**Collaborative.** Finally, with the preceding "C's" in place the program needs to operate synergistically, with a shared vision. Collaboration among program personnel is vital to developing and fulfilling that vision. In fact, the level of integration among support services and instruction is characterized by the extent to which personnel collaborate to create seamless experiences for their students. For example, more meaningful academic support likely occurs when instructors and learning assistance personnel consult to create tutoring or laboratory activities that advance course goals and objectives. Faculty and support service personnel training and development can occur through formal and informal mentoring. Goal setting, innovation, and continuous improvement plans must be developed with input from the professionals charged with carrying out those plans and actions. Collaborative input to these processes is more likely to facilitate buy in, commitment, and ultimately higher rates of student success.

Developmental education is a significant and complex endeavor. Part of our job as scholars and practitioners committed to student success is promoting (or selling!) the advancement of knowledge about our field and conveying what exemplary programs should look like. Share this and other information on comprehensive developmental program solutions with your college leaders.

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Dr. D. Patrick Saxon is an Associate Professor and Director of the fully online Developmental Education Administration Doctoral Program at Sam Houston State University and serves on the National Association for Developmental Education Executive Board. He is coauthor of the book **Attaining Excellence in Developmental Education: Research-Based Recommendations for Administrators** with Dr. Hunter Boylan. For 22 years he managed the research activities of the National Center for Developmental Education. He is the editor of **Research in Developmental Education**, an advisor for the Kellogg Institute, and on the Editorial Review Board of the *Journal of College Reading and Learning*.



**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Community Colleges: New Federal Research Center May Enhance Current Understanding of Developmental Education, by the GAO**

Higher education research reveals approximately 42% of entering community college students were not sufficiently prepared for college-level courses and enrolled in at least one developmental education course. Estimates indicate that less than 25% of these students will complete a degree or certificate.

This study addresses the challenges and strategies faced by community colleges attempting to effect improvements in developmental education.

Read the complete study at: <http://bit.ly/1Awt3dX>

**Right From the Start: An Institutional Perspective on Developmental Education Reform, by MDC**

For students to reach their academic goals and experience equitable access to a range of academic options, it is essential that community colleges support multiple pathways to success and accelerate those pathways through developmental education. Developmental education should constitute a starting point to the broader issues of access and success. These briefs report on successful developmental education reform at seven Achieving the Dream colleges.

Read the complete article at: <http://bit.ly/1sf9x4Q>

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**The Dilemma of Developmental Education**

(continued from page 1)

- ▲ Mandatory assessment practices that are consistent, ongoing, and used to make decisions regarding all aspects of developmental education.
- ▲ Working relationships between Institutional research and developmental education courses.
- ▲ Key indicators with benchmarks so that annual measurements can be evaluated and used to make meaningful change.
- ▲ Mandatory attendance so that students receive the intended intervention and failure due to poor attendance is reduced.
- ▲ Elimination of late registration.
- ▲ Mandatory placement into appropriate courses and into the correct subsequent course. When students jump over a sequence of courses, they often aren't successful. The lowest level of developmental education courses are not intended to get students "college-ready;" they are intended to provide them with the foundation for the next level. Students coming to college with a 3rd grade reading level are not going to be ready for college-level reading in one semester.
- ▲ Mandatory freshman orientation courses and mandatory learning assistance for developmental students.
- ▲ Professional development for all developmental educators. Developmental educators should serve as model instructors, since what works for developmental education works for all courses.
- ▲ Bottom-cut scores implemented for the lowest developmental classes so that illiterate students can get the assistance they need.
- ▲ Gateway courses identified for all of college programs and structured learning support services provided for those courses.
- ▲ Adoption of a best process of regularly monitoring the progress of students (early alert).
- ▲ Implementing varying instructional approaches to meet students' wide-range of abilities and learning styles.

The burden of success rightly belongs to the entire institution. As Kay McKlenney has stated, "students don't do optional," which means that developmental education programs need the backup and support of their institutions. Policies supporting the above variables can ensure that the correct interventions are provided for developmental students.

**Definitions regarding student success need to be revised** or at least taken into account when reviewing retention data. Based on current state and national definitions of student retention, students who take more than three years to complete courses at a community college are not considered successful. Currently, most two-year colleges are using a 3-year timeframe to define retention/success. Therefore, reports conclude that developmental programs aren't working. Further, developmental students are required to take additional courses, in some cases, six or more. As stated earlier when discussing barriers, many developmental students cannot afford to attend full-time; are parents of young children; are returning adults, terrified of starting college; are students with disabilities; are first generation students who have no outside support; or, are students for whom English is a second language. Completion in three years? College

presidents often base funding on these "retention reports."

**Intrinsic motivation needs to be considered** as a factor when addressing the success of developmental education. Why are there students who just don't want help or to help themselves? Many are in developmental classes. Dr. Steve Berg states in a recent blog, "While I do my best to encourage the success of all of my students, I have had to accept that not all of them are reachable. While it is true that some students lack basic foundational background to be successful, it is more often the case that certain students choose not to be successful. They have planted themselves in the shade and that is where they want to be." The data don't report students' intrinsic motivation. How do we get students to change intrinsically when they don't want to change or still aren't ready emotionally or academically for college?

There are no quick-fix solutions, just as there are no single reasons for students' failures. Developmental educators are working with an at-risk student population; each one has varying degrees of under-preparedness not considered in most studies. Let us not be so quick to draw damaging conclusions. Students' educational backgrounds, their expectations, and the demands

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and barriers they face throughout and beyond college, should be considered. No single set of practices will be effective with every student. There will always be room for improvement, clearly.

Future improvements will require developmental educators to partner with their institutional research (IR) departments, and for leaders in the field to connect with state and national educational research organizations. Developmental educators need to establish a unified political voice so that they are included in the research processes of future state-wide and national studies. As developmental educators realize, they must remain committed, open to honest evaluations of their work, and accepting of the authentic need for reform and improvement. This will permit the developmental education dilemma to be addressed aggressively. Our students deserve nothing less.

**Dr. Deborah Daiek** earned her Ph.D. in Instructional Technology with an emphasis on teaching and learning from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. With over thirty years in developmental education, she is the current Associate Dean for Learning Support Services at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan. Her department was the recipient of NADE's John Champaign Memorial Award for the Outstanding Developmental Education Program. She has authored two developmental education reading textbooks and presents professional development workshops regarding student engagement. She is the Past President of MDEC, Michigan Developmental Education Consortium, and currently serves as MDEC's Co-Political Liaison.

