Developmental Education Reform: A Student Success and Equity Imperative

Julianna Barnes, EdD
President
Cuyamaca College
El Cajon, CA

It's time to say "good-bye" to developmental education as we once knew it.

Years ago, I focused my own doctoral research on developmental education in the community colleges and believed that students needed to take layers of remedial courses in math and English to gain the academic skills required to succeed in college-level coursework. Besides, the tried-and-true standardized placement exams that had gone through rigorous reliability studies couldn't be wrong, could they? Analysis of our data revealed students who were placed into remediation had little chance of making it into college-level courses, much less completing college. Additionally, disaggregated data showed that students of color were disproportionately impacted. While community college practitioners and leaders like myself were well intended, what we did not realize at the time is that our practices were harming students.

It's a hard pill to swallow when one considers the millions of students whose dreams came to an abrupt end as a result of our well-intended developmental education practices. We believed then that our students were just not "college-ready." What we have come to realize is that our students have the capacity to succeed in college, but our community colleges have not been "student-ready." Turning the mirror on ourselves and our systems inspired change.

A New President's Impact. In 2015, I stepped in as president at Cuyamaca College, a diverse, mid-sized community college located in San Diego county, known for its natural beauty, student-centered focus, equity-mindedness, and spirit of innovation. Still, not unlike other community colleges, developmental education data were grim and equity gaps were as wide as the Grand Canyon. Given the aforementioned focus on students, equity, and innovation, the college had been dabbling with the possibility of making sweeping changes to its developmental education program. And the college community wondered if the new college president would support such changes.

Like any new college president, I wanted my first convocation to make a lasting impression. And I tell you, this convocation is one for the history books. After delivering my convocation address during which I illuminated our student data to create a sense of urgency for change, I took a bold next step. As the new college president and as a second degree black belt in karate, I wanted to demonstrate my commitment to change. I slipped on my karate gi and black belt and in front of my entire college community, proceeded with a punch to try to break a board that read "Institutional barriers to student success and equity."

After two attempts I did not break that board. However, my hand did break requiring a swift departure to the emergency room which left me feeling defeated and deflated. Upon returning to campus, I was delighted to see a flurry of emails with the overarching message of "Institutional barriers to success and equity are so entrenched that one person alone cannot break through them. It takes a village and we stand with you." And thus, our developmental education reform journey began.

Faculty at the Forefront. Developmental education reform takes a village, but the faculty role cannot be underestimated. I could not be more proud of my math and English faculty for having the courage and determination to lead this work. They went all in, scaling our reform efforts with amazing results. In fact, Cuyamaca College has been recognized in various publications and through state and national awards for our reform work. The recognition is appreciated as it helps to share with other community colleges the story of how to achieve this change for students, but our true reward is student success. We made changes for our students. We did it for the sake of equity. We did it so that our students who place their lives and futures in our hands could realize higher education's promise of a brighter future for themselves and for future generations. We did it because our faculty saw the need and acted.

> *In fact, Cuyamaca College has been recognized in various publications and through state and national awards for our reform work.*

Multiple Measures for Course Placement. Access to college-level math and English courses had eluded our students. To begin, we knew we had to change the way students accessed college-level coursework which required a major change to our placement practices. Like most community colleges, we had been using a standardized placement exam. However, research told us that such high-stakes exams on their own were not

EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Nationally, nearly two-thirds of students entering community college – most from traditionally underserved communities – are informed that they are not fully ready for college-level coursework and are placed in skill-development courses that do not count toward their degree. Typically, developmental courses are focused on building skills in English or Math. Unfortunately, research indicates that students in developmental education are less likely to complete a program and earn a degree or credential. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders Their answers appear below.

Shawndra Daniel, MEd
Educational Diagnostician
Humble Independent School District
Humble, Texas

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:
How can college leaders best reimagine developmental education while working with underprepared students to facilitate their success?

Rebecca Wulf, MS
Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Ivy Tech Community College
Lafayette, Indiana

Access and success in community college are the foundational goals upon which community colleges were created. Although these goals can work in unison, they can also conflict with each other. Open enrolment policies in community colleges allow access for all students who desire higher education; however, this also poses the risk of directly conflicting with student success (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Assessment and placement are critical to student success, especially since a significant number of students entering community college require developmental courses which do not count toward college graduation. Many students do not view taking developmental courses as a means of bridging the "gaps" in their learning, but as a roadblock to their goals. When students realize that developmental courses do not allow for college credit, many drop out and do not return (McClenney & Arnsparger, 2012).

Antrece Baggétt, Associate Chair of History at Houston Community College, states that many colleges have decided that instead of offering zero-credit courses, co-requisite courses are a better alternative. Allowing students to earn credit in a college course while taking the developmental course simultaneously is more attractive to students interested in earning college credit. The drawback of offering co-requisite courses is that if students drop or fail the developmental course and remain in the main course, they do not earn credit, which raises the stakes of noncompletion.

In recent years, there has been a significant change in the nature and delivery of college developmental courses with the integration of technology. 21st-century learners are accustomed to receiving information at a rate that is much faster than it was only ten years ago, and students who require developmental courses can benefit from assistive technology in the classroom (Donlevy, 1999). Today's technology can assist with making the educational experience more effective for those students who have difficulties with writing and reading college-level texts, as well for those lacking an understanding of mathematical concepts. According to Janie Mitchell, K-12 Special Education Teacher and Assistive Technology Curriculum Specialist in Humble Independent School District, software such as speech-to-text programs can assist students in reading or writing on a higher level and also compensate for writing deficiencies. Other programs can aid students with mathematical challenges by allowing them to monitor their progress since the program immediately remediates when it recognizes that a specific gap has a recurring theme.

Given that community colleges are admitting students who require some level of remediation or developmental support, it is critical that college leaders focus on reimagining developmental education to help support underprepared students and facilitate their success. Whether employing corequisite courses, technology-aided learning, or other innovative options, educators must continue to support the twin goals of student achievement and completion.

According to CCCSE's SENSE survey (2018), 83.1% of new community college students agreed or strongly agreed that they were academically prepared to succeed in college, yet 64% of students were required to take a remedial course during their first semester. The disparity between students' confidence in their abilities and the reality of where they are placed may be due to several factors: a mismatch between high-school and college expectations, a loss of knowledge due to a gap between educational experiences, or the difficulty of determining a student's ability based on single high-stakes test are just a few.

Reducing the number of students being placed into remedial college courses requires collaboration between high schools, colleges, and state education governing boards. In 2008, the nonprofit Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation developed initiatives to prepare high school students to be college or career ready. The partnership produced a student-centered curriculum for math and literacy readiness. At-risk high school students are identified no later than their junior year and are placed into these 'bridge' courses.

Over 20 states have implemented the SREB's curriculum or similar programs in their high schools (Board, S. R. E., 2017). Colleges are asked to allow students who successfully complete bridge courses entrance into college courses without a need to take additional placement tests. For instance, students who complete Washington State's Bridge to College Courses with a "B" or better in the Bridge Course are eligible to enter credit-bearing coursework in any of the State of Washington Community and Technical Colleges (OSPI, 2019).

While high school bridge courses may help reduce the need for college remediation for some students, there will still be many students who will require additional support to be successful in entry-level college courses. These students may best be served through co-requisite courses in which they enroll in a remedial support course while co-enrolling in a college-level course. The Community College of Baltimore County developed the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) for developmental writing in 2007. The ALP program has since been adopted or adapted at over 300 colleges (Ostrye, 2019).

When Ivy Tech started to pilot co-requisite courses for our new Quantitative Reasoning course in 2013, faculty questioned whether this model would work. After some tweaks to the co-requisite curriculum and training for faculty, we quickly found that the co-requisite model outpaced the traditional remedial course model in student success. Two-thirds of students who placed into remedial courses were passing their college-level courses! The co-requisite model reduces the stigma associated with taking remedial courses, builds a learning cohort, and reduces the time students spend in remediation.
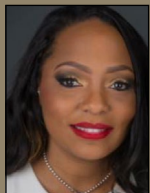
Shawndra Daniel, MEd, is an Educational Diagnostician servicing students with different abilities. She mentors new Educational Diagnosticians in the district and volunteers as an advocate for families needing assistance with special education services and students' rights. Shawndra earned her MEd from the University of Houston-Victoria and is enrolled in the DCCL program. Upon completion of her EdD, her goal is to become a liaison for special services between K-12 and colleges.

Rebecca Wulf, MS, is an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Ivy Tech Community College in Lafayette, Indiana and has served as a Math Program Chair for the last ten years. She was part of the development team for Ivy Tech's Quantitative Reasoning course and served as the Statewide Lead for five years. She has an MS in Mathematics from Purdue University and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State DCCL program.

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Nationally, nearly two-thirds of students entering community college – most from traditionally underserved communities – are informed that they are not fully ready for college-level coursework and are placed in skill-development courses that do not count toward their degree. Typically, developmental courses are focused on building skills in English or Math. Unfortunately, research indicates that students in developmental education are less likely to complete a program and earn a degree or credential. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders Their answers appear below.

Maintaining Momentum in Developmental Education Reform

Christopher M. Mullin, PhD

Director, Strong Start to Finish
Education Commission of the States

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can college leaders best reimagine developmental education while working with underprepared students to facilitate their success?

Developmental education reform is not a new topic, but the momentum behind this movement has intensified over the past decade, as both policy and practice converge to effect meaningful change. The questions are no longer along the lines of, *"Is reform really needed?"* or *"Whose responsibility is it to lead reforms?"* or *"Do these reforms really work?"*

Instead, the conversation is centered around how we can implement at scale the reforms happening in university and college systems of all sizes across the country. Here are three reasons why this is a momentum that cannot be stopped:

First, the research is conclusive. Save the few, students who are placed into developmental education math and English courses meant to remediate perceived academic deficits never complete the courses nor enter credit-bearing courses that are part of a program of study. Rigorous research now shows that reforms focused on changing institutional policy and practice are much more likely to help students complete the course and even graduate than traditional developmental education courses. Data does not lie, and we now have ample proof points that tell us this work is necessary, and can dramatically alter the trajectory of students pursuing degrees.

Second, the reforms are jointly owned. Momentum for developmental reform continues as those involved do not place the blame for poor outcomes on the backs of one group; rather, they acknowledge the role of policy at both the state and institutional levels and practitioners at the campus level, all of whom jointly remove barriers in the following ways:

▲ Placing students in the right courses using policies co-constructed with system and campus leadership.

▲ Accelerating a student's academic experience by faculty and administrators by providing the support students need to pass a credit-bearing math and English course in their first year of study.

▲ Aligning curricula between developmental and the first credit-bearing math and English courses led by faculty and academic departments with a focus on rigor.

▲ Integrating the appropriate credit-bearing math and English courses within a program of study through program committees within campuses and system leadership support.

▲ Supporting faculty and staff as they modify their practice and expand their expertise.

▲ Embedding student supports into math and English courses via partnerships between faculty and advisors.

▲ Refining policy and practice as a campus community as a component of implementation to ensure outcomes do not differ across student characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, income, or race.

▲ Measuring institutional, research-based policy goals and outcomes.

▲ Scaling reforms to all students so the impact is part of campus culture and not reserved for a select population of students.

Third, the change we are seeing is demand-driven. One more reason momentum continues to build has to do with systems of higher education expressing an interest in working at scale. For example, when Education Commission of the States put out a call for letters of interest in scaling developmental education reforms — within a select and limited group of states — through its Strong Start to Finish initiative, it received 47 responses and ultimately was able to support four. This signaled that demand from the field for implementation support was strong. Two more systems have joined SSTF, and now it represents six systems — comprising 250 institutions and serving nearly 4 million undergraduates.

> *One more reason momentum continues to build has to do with systems of higher education expressing an interest in working at scale.*

Since the launch of SSTF, system leaders have consistently reached out to SSTF and Education Commission of the States staff seeking advice for moving reforms forward in their state, as well as for information about how to engage the learning community created through the initiative.

To support the educational experiences of students who benefit from these reforms and system leadership seeking strategic and technical guidance to support student success, Strong Start to Finish recently launched the Seeding Site Grant Program. The program provides targeted technical and strategic assistance to support ongoing efforts of systems preparing to implement developmental education reforms at scale through competitive grants. We opened the program to systems within all 50 states, and received 16 submissions. Clearly, systems are hungry for change and eager to be part of this movement.

It is important to keep in mind the human impact of this momentum. For every system that joins this reform, there are thousands upon thousands of students who stand to benefit – in the short term, and for generations.

It is for these reasons that momentum for developmental education reform grows and grows and grows – and should continue to do so. Strong Start to Finish looks forward to continuing to watch, and where possible, support this research-guided, jointly owned and demand-driven reform.

Christoper Mullin, PhD, serves as director of Strong Start to Finish (SSTF), an initiative supported by the Education Commission of the States. SSTF is comprised of philanthropists, higher education leaders, and practitioners who came together for one reason – to help all students, not just the select few, find success in post-secondary education. Prior to serving in this role, he was the executive vice chancellor of the Florida College System, assistant vice chancellor for policy and research with the State University System of Florida, and program director for policy analysis at the American Association of Community Colleges. He earned his doctoral degree in higher education administration, as well as his bachelor's degree, from the University of Florida. He also holds a master of education degree from Teachers College of Columbia University. Chris has taught at the early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school levels, and at four universities.

Developmental Education Reform *(continued from page 1)*

the most reliable way to place students into appropriate course levels (Hughes, et al., 2011). Plus, these exams had come under scrutiny for being biased against students of color. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that a large majority of our students had been directed, or misdirected, to developmental education.

We learned of the growing evidence which supported the use of multiple measures for placement which includes the use of high school GPA as a better indicator of preparation for college-level coursework. Furthermore, several studies found that the use of high school transcripts reduces how often students are erroneously placed into developmental education (Scott-Clayton, et al., 2014). Further, it should be noted that while we were early adopters of multiple measures, California now has a new law, AB705, mandating the use of multiple measures for the state's 115 community colleges.

> *It's not enough to simply change placement practices. Equally as important are changes in the classroom.*

The early results of using multiple measures at Cuyamaca College are promising:

> Access to college-level math and English increased significantly for all first-time students after eliminating the use of standardized placement and instead using multiple measures. In math, access to college-level increased from 24% to 84% for all first-time students; for Latinx, from 21% to 85%; for African American, from 9% to 73%. In English, access to college-level increased from 12% to 100% for all first-time students; for Latinx, from 7% to 100%; for African American, from 0% to 100%.

Co-Requisite Model and Changes in the Classroom. It's not enough to simply change placement practices. Equally as important are changes in the classroom. Co-requisite or concurrent-enrollment support models have proven effective for many community colleges. Cuyamaca College moved to such a model, abandoning the layers of remediation we once knew (depending on the multiple measures placement, students could enroll directly into college-level courses with support or without). In this model, students enroll in a college-level math or English class with additional time for instruction each week through a co-requisite support course. The additional instruction is taught by the same faculty member and is intermingled within the regular college-level class to provide just-in-time remediation. As a result, students classified as underprepared attain prerequisite skills if and when those skills are needed. The support course and the regular college-level course must be taken together and constitute a one-semester course combo that students experience as a single class. Consequently, students have the ability to successfully complete their college-level math and English courses in just one semester.

It should be noted that while structural changes can lead to significant gains in successful outcomes, alone, they cannot eliminate equity gaps. Professional development efforts for faculty were employed to facilitate equity minded teaching. Faculty worked on personally reflecting

on their own unconscious biases and privilege, learned how to develop healthy relationships with students, and developed curriculum that introduced culturally-relevant content. In essence, classrooms were transformed and now honor and validate the students' social and cultural experiences.

> *While the Cuyamaca College developmental education reform efforts were bold, they are achievable for all community colleges.*

The early results of our co-requisite and classroom redesign are promising:

> Throughput (successful completion of college-level math and English) significantly increased for all first-time students after scaling the use of a co-requisite model and culturally relevant teaching. In math, successful completion of college-level increased from 23% to 67% for all first-time students; for Latinx, from 15% to 65%; for African Americans from 6% to 55%. In English, successful completion of college-level increased from 38% to 79% for all first-time students; for Latinx, from 38% to 66%; for African Americans from 29% to 85%.

Final Thoughts. While the Cuyamaca College developmental education reform efforts were bold, they are achievable for all community colleges. Our efforts were supported by a large body of evidence and backed by commitment and dedication of faculty, staff, and administration. Educational leaders believing in their students' capacity to succeed is the first step. It is our duty and our responsibility to take the next steps and make the bold changes needed to make the promise of education a reality for our communities.

References:

Hughes, Katherine L. and Judith Scott-Clayton (2011). "Assessing development assessment in community colleges." *Community College Review*, 39(4): 327-351.

Scott-Clayton, Judith, Peter M. Crosta, and Clive R. Belfield (2014). "Improving the targeting of treatment evidence from college remediation." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(3): 371-393.

Julianna Barnes, EdD, is the president of Cuyamaca College, a position she has held since October 2015. With an educational career spanning nearly three decades, she is known for her inclusive leadership and deep commitment to student success and equity. Under her leadership, Cuyamaca College was recently recognized nationally by Excelencia in Education and was awarded the John W. Rice Diversity and Equity Award in the California community colleges. Prior to her presidency, Julianna served as chief student services officer for 5 years and dean for 11 years in several California community colleges. She also held various positions at the University of California, San Diego for almost a decade. Julianna received her doctor of education in educational leadership with a community college specialization and a master of arts in education/multicultural counseling from San Diego State University, plus a bachelor of arts in sociology from the University of California, San Diego.