

Making the Case for Developmental Education by Hunter R. Boylan.

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Remedial Versus Developmental Education

The debate over where to do developmental education or whether to do it at all is fraught with misunderstandings, oversimplifications, half-truths, and some outright lies. Many educators and legislators simply do not understand the issue in all of its complexity. Many university faculty and administrators harbor distorted notions of what developmental education is, what it does, and what its true role should be in academe.

A critical misunderstanding in this debate is the distinction between 'remedial' and 'developmental' education. Colleges and universities have long offered precollege-level courses designed to teach the basic academic skills necessary for success in college (Brier, 1984). These served students who were quite competent as poets, writers, or philosophers but lacked mathematical skills or students who had excellent potential as scientists, mathematicians, or engineers but had difficulty with the written word. TIEN, also served some students who were deficient in several basic skills.

Traditionally, these students were enrolled in what were called remedial classes. These were designed specifically to compensate for deficiencies in prior learning. As educational researchers began to understand the factors behind successful college performance, it was recognized that although remedial courses were valuable, they were often not sufficient (Maxwell, 1985). Students fail to do well in college for a variety of reasons, and only one of them is lack of academic

preparedness. Factors such as personal autonomy, self-confidence, ability, to deal with racism, study behaviors, or social competence have as much or more to do with grades, retention, and graduation than how well a student A-rites or how competent a student is in mathematics (Astin, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Higher Education Extension Service, 1992; Sedlacek, 1987).

Recognition of this caused those who taught remedial courses to integrate personal development and academic development into coursework and to add support services such as assessment, counseling, learning centers and laboratories, or advising to their repertoire of interventions. The result was much more than simple remediation of academic skill deficiencies. Instead, it combined remedial instruction with personal and academic development. Subsequently, this process became known as 'developmental education.' Developmental education is not a euphemism for remediation. It is a far more sophisticated concept involving a combination of theoretical approaches drawn from cognitive and developmental psychology. (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1975@ Perry, 1970).

Modern developmental education involves a range of services designed to promote personal and academic development. These services may include counseling; advising; tutoring; topical workshops: individualized instruction; and courses to enhance study skills and strategies, promote critical thinking, or introduce students to the rewards and expectations of college. They may, also include precollege basic skills or remedial courses. In developmental education. remediation is only one of several possible options along a continuum of interventions ranging from occasional tutoring to brush up on forgotten material to a complete batten- of in-depth remedial courses. The choice of interventions is based on assessment information combined with the professional judgement of developmental educators.

Admittedly, there are some institutions where remediation in the traditional sense is still practiced. Such institutions offer only a few remedial courses. But these institutions are not representative of current scholarly thought or even typical practice among most developmental programs.

Issues in the Developmental Education Debate

A second set of issues in this debate have to do with whether or not developmental education is needed in higher education and, if so, where such activities should be placed. The seven points, outlined as follows, address these issues.

1. Students Need Developmental.

Education estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics (I 99 1) indicate that, depending on the state and the type of institution, anywhere between 16% and 40% of each year's incoming students for any given institution are, to some degree, inadequately prepared for college-level academic work. A few need to develop their reading and study skills. Some need to develop their writing skills, and many need to develop their mathematics skills. Of these students, some

may develop their skills through tutoring, workshops, or individualized instruction. Others may, need one or more remedial courses in order to fully develop their skills. Without this skill development they will be unable to pass even introductory courses in some subjects.

Developmental education courses and services help students develop these skills. The National Study of Developmental Education (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1992) indicates that, with the help of developmental programs, underprepared students can pass courses and graduate at rates equal to or greater than those of better prepared students. Without this help large numbers of potentially successful students would be unable to complete college.

2. Most Colleges Need to Admit Underprepared Students.

The nation's most elite institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Colgate, Amherst, or Brown can afford to be highly selective and admit only, the very best prepared students. Most nonselective public and private institutions cannot. They cannot do this for at least two reasons. First, these institutions are committed to making higher education accessible to the citizens of their state or region. They exist, at least partially, to provide a pool of highly literate and well-trained workers and professionals who will promote the economic development of their state or region.

The available pool of any sort of student, let alone the academically, talented ones, is simply not large enough to sustain economic development. According to Hodgkinson (1985) we are 'entering an era in which youth will be in short supply in America' (p. 18). As Hodgkinson also notes, '... in 1950, seventeen workers paid the benefits of each retiree. By 1992, only three workers will provide the funds for each retiree and one of the three workers will be a minority' (p.3). Of these workers, a great many will have grown up in poverty and been denied educational opportunities, and many of the more advantaged will still have failed to master basic literacy and problem solving skills (Hodgkinson, 1985).

Furthermore, as the Carnegie Commission (1980) predicted 15 years ago, the number of 18-year-olds in the population has declined dramatically since 1973 and most states are experiencing a noticeable decline in the number of high school graduates. Consequently, institutions must take some risks in admitting underprepared students in order to expand the potential pool of workers and professionals educated at the postsecondary level.

Second, these institutions must sustain at least minimal levels of enrollment in order to function. To sustain enrollment, they cannot limit themselves only to those who are immediately full prepared for college level work. Today, there are fewer students in the 17-22 year old age bracket, and a smaller percentage of these are graduating from high school now than in 1980 (Hodgkinson, 1985). Consequently, colleges and universities must admit substantial numbers of students who are not yet fully prepared for college. This does not mean that such students cannot be successful. It simply means that they will need help in order to do so. Developmental programs provide this help.

3. Most Colleges and Universities Need Developmental Education

Colleges and universities which admit underprepared students do so on the assumption that with some developmental assistance their preparedness can be improved (Cross, 1976; Keimig, 1983; Maxwell, 1985, Roueche & Snow, 1977). If this assistance were not provided, institutions would either have to fail large numbers of students or lower their academic standards to accommodate student deficiencies. Most institutional administrators realize that neither alternative is acceptable. A potentially successful student who fails in college is a loss of human resources that cannot be easily replaced. Administrators also realize that the integrity of their institution is diminished if sophomore literature classes have to teach students how to write complete sentences, physics classes have to teach basic algebra, or otherwise talented students do not know how to study or engage in critical reflection. An investment in developmental education resolves this dilemma. It insures that students who reach advanced courses will have the skills necessary to do the work in these courses.

4. American Colleges and Universities Have Always Enrolled Underprepared Students

Students who are underprepared for college level work have always been present in American colleges and universities. In 1849, for instance, the University of Wisconsin established a College Preparatory Department for students who lacked the basic skills to be successful in the university, curriculum (Brier, 1984). According to a National Council on Education report appearing 40 years later, 80% of American colleges and universities had preparatory departments in 1889 (based on information in Brier, 1984, p. 3). Martha Maxwell reports that half the students enrolled at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale in the early, 1900's did not meet basic entrance requirements (Maxwell, 1985).

With the exception of a brief period lasting roughly from 1963 to 1973 when the children of the baby boom reached college age, American colleges and universities have rarely been able to engage in highly selective admissions (Boylan, 1988). The presence of underprepared students on college campuses today is not a new phenomenon. It cannot be blamed on affirmative action; affirmative action was not part of the nation's higher education policy in the 19th century. It cannot be blamed on developmental education; developmental education programs only serve the underprepared students already present on campus, they did not recruit them.

5. Developmental Education is Part of the Solution, Not Part of the Problem.

Some administrators and politicians have blamed the presence of developmental programs for a decline in academic standards. This argument is clearly specious. Those who work in developmental programs neither determine admissions criteria nor set academic standards. These are done by admissions officers, administrators, faculty committees, and state higher education executive offices.

Once these standards are set, however, it is the job of developmental educators to insure that students meet them. Students generally do not exit from developmental courses or programs until they are capable of doing college-level work. The purpose of developmental programs is to develop students skills so that they can meet academic standards. By improving students' academic

skills, developmental programs also make it possible for more students to persist in academe while meeting higher academic standards (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1992; Keimig, 1983; Roueche & Snow, 1977). Developmental educators, therefore, contribute to the preservation, not the decline, of academic standards.

6. Relegating Developmental Education to Community Colleges is Not the Answer.

The argument that developmental courses and programs should be offered solely by community colleges rather than by universities reflects a simplistic understanding of higher education. Developmental education is needed in all sectors of higher education, although different ranges of developmental services may be needed by different types of institutions. The more selective institutions, for instance, may need to provide tutoring and assistance with study skills and strategies. Less selective institutions may need to provide a complete battery of courses and services.

If all the university students who needed some form of help in order to succeed were relegated to the community colleges, several things could happen, most of them bad. Here is a summary of a few of them.

- a. If anywhere from 16% to 40% of incoming students were denied developmental courses or services and directed to community colleges and not admitted to universities, many of these institutions would either have to shut their doors or dramatically decrease their courses and services. Underprepared students simply represent too large a percentage of many freshman classes to eliminate them and still function as a university. Many institutions would simply not be able to enroll enough fully prepared students to keep their doors open or their faculty gainfully employed.
- b. If all underprepared students were suddenly relegated to community colleges, these institutions would, in most cases, be unable to handle the influx. Many community college administrators already complain that they cannot provide enough developmental courses and services to meet the needs of students currently enrolled. Having to serve hundreds of additional under-prepared students would, in all likelihood, overwhelm the capacity of many community colleges to provide effective developmental education.
- c. The only way in which students normally served by universities could be adequately served by community colleges would be to take resources currently assigned to universities and reallocate them to 2-year institutions. This would not be an unpopular move but, if actually done, would create a massive dislocation of university resources within state systems.
- d. Underprepared students denied admission to universities are not, necessarily, likely to attend a community college instead. As an alternative, many might elect to attend private colleges that would welcome them and provide developmental courses and services. This would result in a major migration of students from state universities to less selective private colleges or, for those who could afford it, to other states.

e. An assumption behind the argument for relegating underprepared students to community colleges is that they could later transfer to state institutions once they have mastered basic skills and completed the transfer curriculum. Unfortunately, current research indicates that students who enter community colleges are far less likely to attain a baccalaureate degree than those who enter 4-year institutions (Grubb, 1991). This is particularly true for minority students. According to the National Study of Developmental Education (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1992), only about 10% of the underprepared minority students entering community colleges intending to transfer to a senior institution actually do so. Forcing those less prepared students who desire a baccalaureate degree to enter first through a community college would most likely reduce the number of baccalaureate graduates in a given state. It would also have a greater negative impact on the educational attainment of minorities.

7. School Reform Initiatives Are Not Likely to Improve the Quality of High School Graduates in the Foreseeable Future.

Legislators and educators frequently confuse the funding of a solution with the actual solution of a problem. A few confuse passing legislation with accomplishing a solution regardless of whether or not the legislation is implemented effectively or actually, addresses the problem. A recent report funded by the U.S. Department of Education is illuminating in this regard. The report noted that, in some states, even massive infusions of money and 'heroic' efforts at school reform have failed to significantly improve the quality of high school graduates (Hodgkinson, 1993, p. 47). Furthermore, it is well known that, in spite of a spate of reports criticizing our educational systems and arguing for school reform, little improvement has been demonstrated nationally in SAT or ACT scores during the past decade.

School reform may be working, but its effects have yet to be demonstrated. Given this, it is unlikely that the academic skills of high school graduates will improve markedly in the foreseeable future. Until the academic preparedness of high school graduates improves, a gap between what many students are able to do upon graduation and what they must be able to do to succeed in college will continue to exist.

Furthermore, recent high school graduates are becoming an increasingly smaller percentage of those who attend college. The average age of college students in the United States is increasing as more adults return to college. Of those students attending college in the fall of 1992, 35.1% were over the age 25. ("College Enrollment by Age," 1994, p. 15). This means that more than a third of today's college students attended high school at least 7 years ago. There is no evidence to suggest that these students are any better prepared for college than those in traditional age groups, and many of them may be less prepared. Nevertheless, if this trend continues, (and most experts predict that it will) current efforts at school reform are obviously going to be irrelevant for large numbers of older college students.

Conclusion

It is extremely likely that a gap in the academic preparedness of many college bound students will continue to exist at least well into the 21st century. What are some of the possible solutions to this problem?

Many state universities might decide or be forced to decide to take only the top 60% or so of current applicants. This would certainly reduce the number of underprepared students in college and the subsequent need for developmental courses and programs. As a result, however, most such institutions would be dramatically downsized while diverting thousands of students to less selective private institutions. Furthermore, although white students are still the majority of those served by most developmental programs, minority students represent a disproportionate share of developmental education clients. Minorities, therefore, would be among those most adversely affected by such a solution. Substantial numbers would either not be admitted or, if admitted, would have no services available to help them overcome the academic effects of prior racism and discrimination. Under such circumstances, it is entirely possible that what little progress has been made in the educational attainment of people of color in this country could be completely erased within a decade.

Underprepared students might be forced to attend community colleges in order to obtain developmental education. This would overwhelm these institutions with underprepared students and make it even more difficult for developmental courses and services to be provided effectively. At the same time, this would result in a general reduction of baccalaureate degree attainment in those states where such a policy might be implemented. Since underprepared minorities are among the least likely to attain associate degrees and transfer to baccalaureate institutions (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1992; Grubb, 1991), this, too, would have chilling effect on educational opportunity.

Developmental programs might be eliminated with no changes in current admissions policies. This would mean that substantial numbers of students would enter college without the necessary prerequisite skills and have no way to develop them. Such a "sink or swim" policy might enable a few underprepared students to be successful through Herculean effort and whatever assistance faculty might be able to provide to them. Most of the underprepared students, however, would not survive. Cross (1976) estimates that only about 10% of the students who are unprepared for college work would be likely to graduate without developmental education courses and services. The consequence of this option, therefore, would be either massive failure rates or a general "watering down" of the curriculum at many institutions.

Legislative and administrative activities might be directed to improving developmental programs and making them more cost effective rather than eliminating them or shifting their location. Not all developmental programs are as good as they could be. Although most programs are successful in improving their students' skills, the quality of practice across the nation is uneven (Boylan, 1992). Improvements in practice can be made and would improve the cost effectiveness of developmental education. Such improvement might result from providing better student assessment, more accurate diagnosis and placement, more training for developmental education professionals, improved

program evaluation, greater accountability for results, and a subsequent higher quality of service to students. Different institutions might engage in different types of developmental education activity. For instance, some combination coursework and academic support services might be more appropriate for community colleges and less selective universities whereas academic support services alone might be more appropriate for selective institutions.

This latter solution would not only work but would put state economies, institutional survival, educational opportunity, and the general educational aspirations of all our citizens at far less risk than the alternatives. Providing developmental education for underprepared students may, indeed, involve some costs. But those costs are considerably less than the potential costs of not providing it.

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