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Developmental learning community programs that are respectful of students' circumstances, supportive of their educational aims, and thoughtful about the purpose of education can be extremely effective in helping developmental students achieve their educational goals.

Learning Communities and Curricular Reform: “Academic Apprenticeships” for Developmental Students

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In the beginning, potential; in the end, results. With these few words, the president of Saint Augustine's College (North Carolina), one of the first Historically Black colleges in the country, describes what her college has stood for since its founding in 1867. The college's mission conveys an optimistic determination that rests on a simple observation: everyone is an able learner, and our job as educators is to figure out how best to support and stimulate students' desire to learn.

Eighty years after Saint Augustine's welcomed its first students, the Truman Commission on Higher Education called for the establishment of locally controlled colleges so all citizens—regardless of race, gender, religion, geographical location, or financial condition—could benefit from at least two years of postsecondary education. This declaration eventually led to the great expansion of community colleges, or “democracy's colleges,” many established through the organizing efforts of local citizens' groups. The founding principle of these institutions, access to everyone “who can profit from instruction” (Roueche and Roueche, 1993, p. 25), continues to attract educators passionate about democratizing higher education.

Just how effective have community colleges been at turning access into academic success? At first glance, our collective report card is uneven at best. A decade ago, over half of all students enrolled in higher education dropped out during their first year at college (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo, 1993). Today, the first-year attrition rate at two-year colleges hovers at 45 percent compared with 26 percent at four-year colleges (Lamkin,

2004). These figures, augmented by local campus attrition data, serve as a backdrop for introducing learning communities as an educational reform strategy known for its dramatic impact on student retention rates (Taylor and Associates, 2003).

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education uses the term *learning communities* to encompass various approaches to curricular reform that depart from the usual pattern of instructors teaching separate classes in separate subjects to separate groups of students. Learning communities intentionally restructure students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students and faculty and to build curricular connections across disciplines, professional and technical programs, and skill areas. In the context of developmental education, learning communities restructure curriculum where student need is greatest; that is, those courses or areas of the curriculum where students often flounder and fail. Learning communities create the kind of learning environments that engage students in the hard, persistent, and challenging work associated with academic success.

This chapter begins with an overview of what it means to be "at risk" in higher education, which is a starting point for examining learning community practice in relation to three complementary strands of research: key factors associated with educational completion, students' conceptions of their own abilities and the implications for persistence, and the effects of collaborative pedagogy on student engagement. This research informs the different learning community approaches, described later in this chapter, that have been designed to turn potential into results—in developmental education, between developmental education and college level studies, and across the community college curriculum.

Being "At Risk" in Higher Education: The Context for Learning Communities

The promise of equitable educational opportunity for all confronts an undeniable reality: many entering students will not be ready for college because of a variety of external barriers that reduce their chances for academic success even before they attend their first class.

A first barrier, continuing patterns of separation and discrimination, refers to systemic class exclusion and racial segregation: impoverished neighborhoods, poorly funded schools, and curriculum stripped of its academic content. As McCabe (2000) indicates, "Poverty has the highest correlation with educational underpreparedness at every level, from preschool to graduate school" (p. 12).

Another barrier to academic success is the one-size-fits-all approach to learning and assessment that contributes to the estrangement of students who are expected to adjust to an academic culture not designed with them in mind, at places where they do not feel at home. Very few higher education

institutions know how to maximize the intellectual and leadership potential of all their students, or what Tatum (2004) refers to as the ABCs of creating effective learning environments: affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership.

A third barrier, the misalignment of high school work with college-level expectations, describes a common situation where even those students with good high school grades are not ready for college. Among high school students who intend to continue their education, only 67 percent earn standard high school diplomas and only 42 percent graduate with college entry skills (McCabe, 2000).

Educational opportunity is also tied to affordability. Two recent government reports, *Access Denied* and *Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America* (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001, 2002), indicated that the opportunity gap between income groups is wider than it was thirty years ago. In the mid-1970s the total price of a four-year public college education as a share of family income was 42 percent; this proportion climbed to a staggering 70 percent by 2003. Underfunding of education, rising tuition costs, and reduced financial aid have prevented hundreds of thousands of high school graduates from enrolling in higher education (Fitzgerald, 2004).

In addition, many community college students now work more than thirty hours a week, attend school part-time, raise children as single parents, pay for college, care for children at home, and worry about the affordability of going to school, all of which makes them less likely to meet their educational goals (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2002). An added liability, being a first-generation student, is overshadowed by the most telling risk factor of all, academic preparation. The more students need developmental education, the less likely they will stay in school, persist, and graduate (Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1985; Maxwell, 1979).

Findings from a national survey conducted in fall 2001 indicate that the need for developmental education is great among community college students. For instance, eighteen states estimated that 40 percent or more of entering college students need developmental education, although this average masks a broad spectrum: in some colleges the estimate is as low as 10.4 percent; in others it is as high as 70.9 percent (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

Key Factors Associated with Educational Completion: Implications for Developmental Curricula

Adelman (1999) identifies three factors that contribute most to degree completion. First, "academic intensity and quality of secondary school curriculum" are more critical than either socioeconomic status or precollege academic indicators such as test scores, class rank, or academic GPA (p. 84). Second, students who successfully complete higher levels of mathematics

have a greater likelihood of completing a degree. Third, students who require developmental reading are less likely to complete their degrees than students who take other types of developmental classes. The critical importance of intensity and quality of high school curriculum in ensuring successful transition from secondary school to college-level work and eventual degree completion led Adelman (1999) to conclude that “opportunity to learn” inside and outside school makes all the difference in whether students will be successful in their studies.

For developmental educators, the message could not be more clear: curriculum quality is the bridge between students’ often inadequate and poor educational experience in high school and difficult college-level courses. Educational programs for developmental students must be engaging, substantive, and purposeful; they should serve as an intense, abbreviated “academic apprenticeship” where the habits of mind and the cluster of abilities associated with academic success are learned (Malnarich and Associates, 2003).

Several studies on developmental education describe best practices for providing quality developmental curricula. Noteworthy are early studies by Cross (1971, 1976) that emphasize the use of college-level materials, even for struggling students. In *Beyond the Open Door* (1971), Cross is highly critical of academic programs that focus on student deficiencies instead of building on student potential. She argues that students who consistently place in the bottom third of their class based on traditional tests of academic achievement and traditional curricula, are not “less skillful” than others but approach learning differently and often avoid learning something new because they fear failure.

In a follow-up study, Cross (1976) examines thirty years of research on effective ways to work with underprepared students and concludes that “skills training must be integrated into the other college experiences of the student” (p. 42) because there is no evidence that learning generic skills has any transferability. She also recommends that students in developmental courses have the opportunity to earn college credit as an incentive for taking the risk to learn something new. Similarly, Roueche and Roueche (1999) note that exemplary programs for academically underprepared students marry access and academic excellence and that curricular coherence is a criterion for excellence.

One of the most effective intervention strategies in developmental education, supplemental instruction (Boylan, 2002), targets high-risk courses rather than at-risk students. This model is implemented in courses where 30 percent or more students receive a D or F as a final grade or withdraw from the course, and supplements each course with regularly scheduled, weekly study sessions. These sessions are held outside class time, are open to any interested student, and are led by peer facilitators who successfully completed the course in the previous term. The supplemental instruction sessions help incoming students in a timely, discipline-specific way that is

free from the stigma of remediation. During study sessions, students work collaboratively on course-generated assignments and problems. By 1999, more than 250,000 students participated in supplemental instruction (Arendale, 2002).

Like supplemental instruction, learning communities for developmental students need to be intentionally located in curricular trouble spots. Such “at risk” locations in the academy include high-risk courses where 30 percent or more of students drift away after one month, graveyard courses where 50 percent or more of students earn low grades or drop out, gateway courses that have a reputation among students for being tough, platform courses for entry into professional and technical programs, and transition courses for developmental students and second language speakers who are moving into college-level courses. We need to be especially attentive to patterns among students considered at risk in higher education. In particular, we should examine whether students earn the credits they sign up for, whether required courses are repeated by a particular group of students, and whether racial and ethnic groups are underrepresented in some courses but overrepresented in others.

An understanding of these issues, along with data about high-risk courses and analyses of where students struggle most in a course and why, form the basis for deciding what kind of learning community intervention would lead to improved student learning. For instance, Spokane Falls Community College’s (Washington) robust “Learning How to Learn” community began with a link between its developmental study skills program and a difficult transfer-level biology course. Lane Community College (Oregon) integrated two high-failure courses for majors in the health occupations—chemistry and cell biology—into “BioBonds: Building Blocks for Your Body,” which became a prerequisite and a requirement for the associate degree in nursing. Fayetteville Technical Community College (North Carolina) created an integrated module for introductory algebra and basic chemistry to stem the high failure rate in these developmental courses. The college soon created more modules, and eventually, a team-taught course. In all of these learning communities, student retention and persistence increased dramatically (Fogarty, Dunlap, and Associates, 2003; Malnarich and Associates, 2003).

Students’ Conceptions of Their Own Abilities and Persistence: Developing Potential Based on High Expectations

Recently, several scholars have examined students’ academic motivation and self-theories about their abilities as learners. Dweck (2000) notes that self-theories, even more than self-confidence, influence students’ approaches to learning. In formal educational contexts, for instance, students tend to adopt achievement goals that are either learning- or performance-oriented.

Learning-oriented goals focus on increasing competence and deepening understanding, whereas performance goals center on “winning positive judgments of your competence and avoiding negative ones” (p. 48). These different outcomes reflect students’ conceptions about intelligence and their own abilities. Performance-oriented students tend to adopt an “entity theory,” where ability and intelligence are static and being good or not good at something is immutable and fixed; these students expect quick results with little effort. By contrast, learning-oriented students tend to adopt an “incremental theory,” in which intelligence and ability are changeable and contingent; these students appreciate that learning is hard work.

Educators are also either entity theorists or incremental theorists, and their views influence how they assess students’ abilities. As Grubb and Associates (1999) point out, a conventional approach to instruction is often based on the view that intelligence is fixed and one-dimensional, “that students who score poorly on diagnostic tests are deficient, lacking the skills and knowledge that would enable them to score at the right level. The language of deficiency is quite common in conventional instruction, particularly in remedial and developmental education” (p. 31).

However, as Smilkstein (2003) demonstrates, learning is not about deficits, but is, instead, about potential. In *We’re Born to Learn* (2003), she summarizes findings from an extended participatory research project and highlights six main stages associated with the “brain’s natural learning process” (p. 49). In all cases, practice (and more practice) over time is key to moving from not knowing how to do something, to becoming reasonably competent, to eventually achieving mastery. This analysis validates the incremental theory on the development of ability; learning is not held back until each step is mastered but is both developmental and reiterative. For instance, when we are learning to ride a two-wheel bicycle, we do not repeatedly practice the correct way to place our hands on the handlebars; we move onto the “real thing”—the chance to pedal a few yards on our own. Because learning communities purposefully restructure student and faculty time so the curriculum is less fragmented and more integrated, students have the opportunity to develop their abilities in an incremental way.

Effects of Collaborative Pedagogy on Student Engagement: The Case for Learning Communities

Learning communities have been credited with improving student engagement, persistence, and academic achievement (Astin, 1993; McCabe and Day, 1998; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo, 1993; Tinto, 1997). They are more than an instructional strategy; they represent an intentional departure from many traditional practices in higher education—including in developmental education—and their growth from marginal, isolated experiments to a national reform effort is well documented (Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004).

Like other learning communities, those designed for developmental students vary based on the degree of curricular integration and degree of collaboration among faculty and staff. Three general patterns or structural frameworks for learning communities exist, including unmodified courses, linked or clustered courses, and team-taught learning communities. The common aim in all these frameworks is to foster explicit social and intellectual connections among people and ideas.

Unmodified Courses. In this type of learning community, ten to thirty students enroll in two or three larger and unmodified classes. They also enroll in an additional course that is available only to them. One adaptation of this model, freshman interest groups (FIGs), regroups students based on shared academic interests such as an interdisciplinary theme, a topic-based inquiry, or a major. The additional course might orient students to campus support services, allow for career exploration tied to academic advising, or offer course-related study groups, skill-based workshops, service learning projects, or field trips. FIGs may be led by teaching assistants, student peer mentors, academic advisers, counselors, faculty, or a teaching team, and credit hours can range from zero to three (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004).

Another adaptation, the integrative seminar or colloquy, uses the additional course to deepen student learning and build community through theme-based readings, discussions, and research projects. A faculty team—usually instructors of the larger classes—convenes the seminar. For instance, at one institution where 75 percent of beginning students need developmental courses, an “open to all” critical inquiry seminar introduces students to the expectations and requirements for successful college learning and provides transitional support for all students without stigmatizing those who are working on basic academic skills.

Linked or Clustered Classes. In this second type of learning community, students register together in two or more courses that are explicitly linked by content or theme. Faculty coordinate syllabi and assignments and intentionally foster community through social and curricular connections between the linked but distinct courses. Linked or paired courses are often scheduled back-to-back to facilitate collaborative work, and the time at the end of one class and the beginning of another provides an opportunity for the teaching team to collaboratively facilitate project work, seminars, and group presentations.

Often, introductory skill-building classes such as composition, speech, information literacy, and computer applications are linked to challenging content courses. When two or more courses are linked they are often referred to as a *cluster*. Both links and clusters enroll a “pure cohort,” where the same twenty-five to thirty students attend both classes. Some links and clusters connect larger general education courses with smaller classes such as writing, study strategies, or speech, and the smaller classes incorporate the content of the larger class into their curricula. At La Guardia Community

College (New York), the New Student House program for ESL and developmental students includes two developmental courses (reading and writing), a college-level content course, and a freshman seminar taught by a counselor who meets weekly with the faculty team to evaluate student progress. In the semester prior to teaching in this program, the faculty team members plan the integrated curriculum and develop a joint syllabus that includes common readings, films, and field trips. They also design joint assignments using common materials, which allows each discipline to become a resource for the other (Malnarich and Associates, 2003).

Team-Taught Learning Communities. In team-taught learning communities, students enroll in a fully team-planned and team-taught program of study across disciplines and skill areas that usually focuses on an integrative theme, question, issue, or topic. Teaching teams sometimes include counselors, student affairs professionals, and librarians, and the teaching team's preparation for class constitutes its own learning community. Learning opportunities for students include seminars, internships, laboratory studies, service learning, and extended research projects. For instance, Skagit Valley College (Washington State) integrates Spanish and English grammar in "En Otros Terminos/In Other Words" (Fogarty, Dunlap, and Associates, 2003). De Anza Community College (California) integrates developmental reading, developmental writing, and an introduction to the visual arts in "Comics Speak Our Lives: The Graphic Novel Meets English 1A" (Malnarich and Associates, 2003).

Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1993) published the first in-depth assessment of students' academic and social experience in learning communities as part of a national research project on student learning in higher education. They investigated the freshman interest group at the University of Washington, the coordinated studies program at Seattle Central Community College, and learning community clusters at La Guardia Community College. The results of this study drew educators' attention to the merits of collaborative pedagogy. First, when students are part of a cohort or community of peers, their attendance and participation improve, and the groups formed in class often meet outside class to study and socialize. Second, when students are exposed to intellectual and cultural diversity through team teaching and classroom activities, they feel encouraged to explore their own identity and find their own voice. Third, when students learn in collaborative settings, their academic performance and persistence increase. Finally, even when students attend large impersonal institutions or commute to school, collaborative learning is possible and works (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo, 1993). This fourth finding surprises many educators who do not associate learning communities with large inner-city community colleges.

In a comprehensive review of 150 research studies and assessment reports, Taylor and Associates (2003) reach similar conclusions: "Learning communities, structured in a variety of ways, are a proven and effective strategy for improving undergraduate education with respect to student persistence, performance, and perceptions of satisfaction and learning" (p. 66).

Recommendations for Creating Effective Learning Communities

In creating learning communities, the question “What do we want students to know and be able to do ‘out there’ that we are responsible for ‘in here?’” can be considered in a longer time frame than a quarter or semester and in a broader context than that offered in traditional, fragmented developmental curricula (Malnarich and Lardner, 2003). Developmental learning community programs that are respectful of students’ circumstances, supportive of their educational aims, and thoughtful about the purpose of education usually share a set of defining characteristics.

Infuse Intellectually Rigorous, Inclusive Curriculum with High Expectations. Programs that integrate skills with content, emphasize reading- and writing-intensive assignments, and use college-level materials help students learn how to do college-level work by actually having them do it. By combining intellectual rigor with skillful developmental pedagogy, faculty members indicate that they expect that students will be successful. At Grossmont Community College (California), students read, discuss, and write about a selection of engaging books that are respectful and representative of diverse cultural knowledge. The program’s success is demonstrated by the growth of linked classes at the college, which totaled fifty in 2003. At Shoreline Community College (Washington State), students enrolled in “College Knowledge” develop a critical appreciation of academic culture through an in-depth study of classic readings from the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences (Malnarich and Associates, 2003).

Design Developmentally Appropriate Assignments and Award Fluid Credits. The shift from a curriculum based on decontextualized skills to one that emphasizes contextualized abilities allows students to work on developing essential knowledge as they engage in intellectually stimulating and often thematically based learning community work. At Seattle Central Community College, learning communities draw on the content of two or more introductory college-level courses and often include a component that awards ESL, developmental writing, or English composition credit based on the quality of students’ written work. At De Anza Community College, students enroll in a large college-level lecture as well as one of three smaller writing cohorts (ESL, developmental English, or college English). The issues and questions emphasized in assignments are the same, but the expectations for paper length, references cited, and written expression are specific to each class.

Invite Student Participation in the Creation of Knowledge. By extending the definition of a learning community to include places where new knowledge is constructed, seminars and class discussions can offer unique opportunities for diverse students to learn across their own significant differences. For instance, faculty in La Guardia Community College’s New Student House design classroom activities and make curricular choices that intentionally introduce non-Western experiences, language, and values

into the classroom in order to disturb what people “know” to be true. Their students, already among the most diverse in the country, are invited to explore diversity and engage in comparative cultural analysis that upsets essentialist and monocultural notions of “truth” (Koolsbergen, 2001; van Slyck, 1997).

Fulfilling Student Potential

“One of the tasks of the progressive educator,” Freire (1992) writes, “is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (p. 9). A conversation with a team of developmental educators from Miami Dade College (Florida), at a workshop on designing learning communities, illustrates how developmental educators can help students realize “opportunities for hope.” The faculty team described an integrated assignment they had designed to connect developmental reading, writing, and mathematics.

No longer skill-based and school-bound, the team freely explored new learning possibilities: What might the interdisciplinary theme or topic-based inquiry be? Who were their students? Where did they live? What issues did their communities face? By bringing their students’ worlds into the classroom, the possibilities for their proposed learning community burst through the constraints of the academy. Students would become knowledgeable about a critical issue and become active in their communities; they would write informational pamphlets, conduct teach-ins, work with elementary and middle-school teachers; they would read, write, and decipher statistics in the interests of the people, for the people. Welcome to democracy’s colleges and the yet unfulfilled dream. *In the beginning, potential; in the end, results.*

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