A Call for Action
The Parity of Esteem: Students’ Aspirations and Our Work as Educators

We respect developmental education because of its risk taking, its fundamental value system, and its expressed commitment to an academic underclass, those students who are frequently ignored, shoved to the side, and mistreated on many campuses . . . I am particularly concerned that the mounting attacks against developmental education are based on intolerance, racism, misunderstanding, ignorance, prejudice, and selfishness. I have not devoted 30-plus years of my life to higher education to want to see the clock set back.

John N. Gardner, Preface, Developmental Education: Preparing Successful College Students, (Higbee and Dwinell)

In October 1999 the General College of the University of Minnesota and its Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy convened the First Intentional Meeting on Future Directions in Developmental Education. Twenty-one local, regional, and national leaders from the developmental education field met for two days of intense discussion. People whose scholarship has been cited in this monograph—Martha Maxwell, Hunter Boylan, David Arendale, and Martha Casazza—joined other teachers, researchers, economists, and administrators. In the foreword to the meeting’s published proceedings, Terence Collins and David Taylor alert us to why we should be concerned: “. . . policy makers and legislators are in full retreat from the principle of broad access” (2000, 5; emphasis added).

Before turning to the conclusions reached by participants, we look briefly at state policies related to developmental education followed by an account of a February day that crystallizes for me, at least, what is at stake and what this implies for the work of educators.

Undermining education’s purpose and possibilities

Since John Gardner declared his unequivocal support for developmental education, the situation has deteriorated. Findings from a fall 2001 survey conducted by the Center for Community Policy at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) confirm a disturbing trend. In ten states, public four-year institutions are discouraged or prohibited from offering “remedial education”: Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, New Mexico, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia. By 2005, all of Louisiana’s four-year institutions will not be allowed to enroll students who need developmental classes. The City University of New York (CUNY) is phasing out developmental education at four-year institutions, a stance now adopted by the California State University system. In Massachusetts, no more than 10 percent of the students enrolled can receive developmental instruction.

Earlier we noted that 41 percent of first time students in all undergraduate institutions currently take at least one developmental course in reading, writing, or mathematics. In the ECS study, twenty-nine states were able to estimate the percentage of entering students in fall 2001 that would need developmental education. Among four-year institutions, eight states place the figure at 25 percent or higher, with Connecticut the lowest at 5.5 percent and Indiana the
highest at 50 percent (ECS 2002, 4). By comparison, among two-year colleges, eighteen states place the figure of entering students needing developmental education at 40 percent or higher, with Alabama lowest at 10.4 percent and Tennessee highest at 70.9 percent. Among the forty-seven states responding to the ECS survey, a dozen or more states are debating the following policy issues: whether to limit or eliminate remedial courses in higher education; whether to make community colleges solely responsible for remedial education; and whether to charge K-12 systems for high school graduates who need remediation. Nine states are debating whether developmental education should be contracted out. Four states—Alaska, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—prohibit the use of state financial aid for developmental education.

Many institutions dedicated in practice to the democratization of higher education find themselves in a precarious place where budget cutbacks leave little recourse but to raise tuition even though student aid budgets can barely keep up with escalating college and tuition costs. In its May 30, 2003, cover story the Chronicle of Higher Education compares budget cuts at three institutions in Washington state—the University of Washington-Seattle (UW-Seattle), Eastern Washington University (EWU), and Seattle Central Community College (SCCC)—to illustrate a trend that is repeated in other states. At first glance, budget cuts to community colleges that serve the neediest, most academically underprepared and economically disenfranchised appear to be lower than cuts to universities. The cuts, though, turn out to be disproportionately high for community colleges since they represent a greater percentage of an institution’s total budget. If we map onto this picture students’ race and ethnicity and whether an institution is highly selective like UW-Seattle or open admissions like the other two institutions—combined with what we know about at-risk students and a family’s economic status—rising tuition defers the dreams of the most underrepresented students in higher education. Both four-year and two-year institutions in the country are already cutting back in tutoring, counseling, and advising that have been lifesavers for incoming students who require support as they adjust to a new academic culture and the challenges of demanding college work.

Rigid placement policies also threaten to undermine research-based best practices in developmental education, especially those related to integrated learning and learning community work. In twenty states, placement in developmental courses is determined at the state level by statute and/or board policy even though “degrees of preparedness” are highly contextual (Maxwell 1979). Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming have a state-mandated exam. For educators working on integrated learning initiatives that straddle developmental- and college-level courses, the findings related to “concurrent enrollment” undercut educators’ expertise and judgment: “In many states, students can take remedial courses in conjunction with occupational programs, but must complete remedial coursework before taking general education courses” (ECS 2002, 3). Among states responding to the survey, Maryland requires students to complete developmental coursework before taking college-level courses.
Radical policy changes at a state level are not matched by equally radical changes on other fronts requiring attention such as aligning “misaligned expectations” or reducing the effect of “risk factors” or closing the “academic achievement gap” that surfaces as early as elementary school and persists up to graduate studies (see Chapter 1). Nor have placement assessments been scrutinized in relation to what they do or do not reveal about students’ abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics.

The full consequences of all of these policy decisions for students—and for campuses that struggle to serve them well—have not yet been tracked. But we know who will be immediately affected by regressive policies: at-risk students who work hard to realize high hopes. Many are minority, low-income, or disadvantaged students; some are recent immigrants and refugees; others are adults returning to school for job retraining. Where will people go who are turned away from public four-year institutions . . . then from public two-year institutions . . . and at what social cost? To date, higher education’s collective voice has not been raised in support of people’s right to an education and the role played by developmental education in the long trek toward an education of quality for all. Nor have we mounted an offensive against policies that derail years of work by educators less well known than John Gardner whose convictions about the purpose and benefits of an educated citizenry have transformed higher education for the better.

Choosing among contradictory realities

A day in February 2003 reminds me about the deep rifts in public education that countless people work so hard to repair, and why a practical commitment to access, equity, and a first-class education for all must be supported as a crucial public good. Faced with contradictory realities, we need to be intentional about the choices we make.

In the morning, I meet with an Evergreen internship student to discuss her work as a librarians’ aid at an urban inner-city elementary school for poor and frequently homeless children. We look at a girl’s writing that describes a video she likes along with my student’s annotations of a paragraph the girl read during a tutoring session. What does she know how to do as a reader and as a writer? How might Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development apply to working with her on reading and writing? Beyond the shock of how far below expected skill levels this sixth-grade youngster’s work appears to be (yet entirely expected in keeping with her actual school attendance), we discover an inventive bright mind and internally coherent language use. The internship is difficult. Small advances are followed by long absences; children disappear. Classroom teachers insist that children sent to the library must complete drill exercises on basic skills before they can use the computers (their favorite activity) or read books and draw (my student’s preferred activity with them). The family literacy program my student is working on is hard to organize when privation is constant, multiple languages are spoken, and the idea of a family learning how to use a public library together flounders on a simple rule—you need a home address to check out books.
In the afternoon, Washington Center co-hosts a meeting for developmental educators with the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges at South Puget Sound Community College. During a first presentation, instructors and some administrators from mainly two-year institutions discuss findings from a telephone research study conducted in the summer of 2002 on current concerns in the field, how students are placed in courses, and innovative programs underway, including examples of integrated curriculum within developmental education and linked courses between developmental education, English as a Second Language, and college-level courses. The researchers identified many common themes and concerns voiced by the majority of faculty and administrators. Among these, several stand out in relation to the monograph’s intent to encourage greater collaboration across a campus in support of differently prepared students’ learning. First, the people canvassed feel demoralized by the stigma their students and they experience; second, they report that communication with college-level instructors is strained and the two faculty groups do not work often or well together; third, they think students need to receive continued support since completing developmental classes is not necessarily the equivalent of college readiness; and fourth, they worry that the gap between developmental exit standards and college entry standards reinforces the idea among students that developmental courses are gatekeepers that waste students’ time and prevent them from furthering their education. By contrast, faculty who teach linked or clustered courses describe their experience in very different ways. Most of the people interviewed do not know about Washington state’s College Readiness Project.

The next presentation reintroduces the College Readiness project, completed a few years earlier, to a group of mainly new faculty, the majority who are adjuncts and part-timers. They want to know where they can find the original study, typical student assignments, and the rubric for student learning outcomes that, if mastered, would signal “readiness” for college-level work. A rumor that a state official is thinking of renaming developmental education prompts cynical comments. Some respondents to the summer questionnaire are in the room and “feeling stigmatized” is one of the main issues facing instructors and students; they doubt that a name change will neutralize an environment where they feel their work is increasingly marginalized and its value questioned.

In the evening, a sixth annual gala fund-raiser and banquet is underway at the same college that made its room available to us in the afternoon. The event is co-hosted by a group of African American and Native American parents and community members whose motto, “Education is the key to our future,” connects their many activities. The founder, Larry Jenkins, kept asking kids who rode in his school bus what it would take for them to continue their education. Eventually they told him—money. Since 1997 the Thurston Group has organized its own Students of Color College Recruiting Weekend to help local minority high school students move on to higher education. This evening is part of a bigger event, the Student Tour of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Representatives from the different institutions in the South, where Thurston County students will visit, are here, along with some from Washington state’s two- and four-year institutions.
President Suber from Saint Augustine’s College, Raleigh, North Carolina, is speaking. She explains that her college, started by prominent Episcopal clergy in 1867, was established after the Civil War to educate freed African Americans. The mission has not really changed over time: “In the beginning potential, in the end results.” These words, repeated several times during her speech, draw people together—parents of potential students, community supporters, and educators from elementary schools, community colleges, and universities. In the anecdotes she tells about different students whose lives have been changed at Saint Augustine’s College, the message is clear: everyone can learn and our work as educators is to make sure motivated students realize their potential.

We are listening to the best version of ourselves as educators. In fact, the entire event is part of a long tradition where communities’ grass roots organizing efforts secure the next generation’s well-being through education. This tradition extends from outside the academy to within, where educators in the tradition of Saint Augustine’s College “make a way” for the newly come. As Terence Collins writes:

If we take a long view we see that developmental education traces its many roots to Reconstruction, to the Morill Land Grant Act, to the Progressive Era, to the Workers’ Colleges of the Great Depression, to the G.I. Bill of Rights, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the Community College explosion of the late-mid-Twentieth Century, and to the Open Admissions movement that followed hard upon these latter events. We in developmental education are heirs to various movements of optimism about human possibility and the transformative possibilities of higher education. We and our students enact daily a peculiarly American optimism about human change and intellectual growth. (2002, v)

Despite the field’s tenuous foothold within higher education, its essential contribution looks very different from outside the academy by people trying to get in. Developmental educators stand with other colleagues who are allies in the long protracted struggle for inclusion, social justice, and civil rights through the means of education. In the midst of contradictory realities, wise choices need to be made.

**Naming the challenges ahead**

From the outset of this monograph, we have been hopeful about our capacity as educators—whatever our area of expertise—to work collaboratively to solve the problems experienced by students new and underprepared for college. When representatives from the developmental education field met in October 1999 to discuss challenges and propose future directions “in the face of a full retreat from the principle of broad access” (Collins and Taylor 2000, 5), they did so with developmental education’s historic legacy in mind as well as the immediate reality that the work undertaken by developmental education programs to support student learning, especially in four-year public institutions, would need to be reconfigured.
Among the many issues and ideas named in the record of proceedings from this October meeting, the “challenge of mainstreaming developmental education” (7-9) is the most immediate and critical one to address. With waning support for developmental education, how can we embed the best practices into the core curriculum of undergraduate education? The circumstances require us to collectively challenge an elitist academic culture that deems certain kinds of learning less worthy than others, a call to action K. Patricia Cross made so long ago. Perhaps we can treat students who are struggling to learn something new in the way we would treat someone who is dear to us: we celebrate accomplishments and we offer consistent support.

The times call for us to move to a new stage in learning community work—one from designing and supporting learning communities for a relatively small number of students to one that embraces the full potential of learning communities to serve many more students, especially those who are underrepresented in higher education. To accomplish this aim, we invite educators involved in learning community work to intentionally seek out their developmental education colleagues—including those with little or no experience in learning communities—to advance our common work on several fronts.

- **a) Learning communities need to be situated where students struggle most with their studies.** We need to use institutional data to help us shift from an emphasis on “boutique” offerings on the margins of campus practice to learning communities designed to improve all students’ learning in both developmental education and college-level studies, carefully tracking the results for students most at-risk in higher education.

- **b) Faculty and teaching teams need to base expectations for student learning on abilities-based criteria and standards, articulated within a developmental perspective.** We need to think through learning outcomes for beginning, developing, and advanced performance, so we can encourage and challenge students to go beyond their own expectations for learning.

- **c) Campuses need to provide institutional support for research-based pedagogy and curriculum development.** We need to develop in-house educational opportunities for teams of educators to learn about current research-based best practices in developmental education and learning communities’ work. We also need to reorganize our time so we can develop, implement, and assess plans designed to support students new and underprepared for college level studies.

This shift in emphasis from learning community offerings planned by faculty excited by the prospects of teaching together to scaled-up efforts requiring broad-based collaboration between developmental educators and learning community practitioners is daring, difficult work.

In truth, the day in February sharpened this monograph’s purpose. The coalition of citizens that sought to establish community colleges as “democracy’s colleges” hoped to create higher education institutions that would welcome all learners, especially from their local communities. People imagined places free
from a hierarchy of knowing that arbitrarily favors one kind of learning over another. They imagined comprehensive institutions where continuing education, adult basic education, English as a Second Language, developmental education, university transfer, and professional and technical programs would be on an equal footing—the opportunities for cross-fertilization and collaboration among diverse educators and students, a genuine benefit of teaching and learning. In some respects, the “invigorated, practical liberal arts education” as described in *Greater Expectations* is not so different from citizens’ initial hopes for the pluralistic student learning they imagined would happen in higher education, especially for community colleges. They imagined places that would increase the social mobility of minority and working-class students, their sons and daughters.

The role learning communities can play in the high stakes endeavor of preparing students for an education of quality—if these efforts are scaled up and become an initiative embraced by an entire institution—is a conversation worth pursuing and a practice worth doing. When you go to the Pasadena City College’s Teaching and Learning Communities Program, whether in person or virtually, you will be greeted by a wonderful motto: “The classroom door is open: imagine the possibilities.” Students do. It is our work to figure out how we can support and challenge students—and ourselves—so they can meet our greater expectations while realizing their own.

**Endnotes**

1. UW-Seattle is 74 percent white, 19 percent Asian, 3 percent Hispanic, 2 percent black, and 1 percent other; EWU is 80 percent white, 4 percent Asian, 3 percent Hispanic, 2 percent black, and 11 percent other; and SCCC is 48 percent white, 17 percent Asian, 9 percent Hispanic, 13 percent black and 13 percent other.

2. High school exit exams are used by no state to determine whether students need developmental classes, a telling fact regarding the alignment between K-12 exit standards and college entrance requirements.

3. Findings from this study undertaken by Kathleen Byrd and Kathy Harrigan are summarized in a handout, *Narrative: Common Themes and Concerns*, 2002.

4. In its first year the group awarded $300,000 in scholarships, grants, and stipend monies to “support students’ dreams.” In 2003, 32 students will receive over $2,000,000 in awards.

**References**


Malnarich, G. 1994. “. . . whiz into the future”: *Learner Agency and Teaching Adults Reading*. Burnaby: Simon Fraser University.


Stoll, E. 1999. “Interdisciplinary Learning Communities at De Anza College: Moving from the Margins Toward the Mainstream.” In *Strengthening Learning Communities: Case Studies from the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project (FIPSE)*, by J. MacGregor et al. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.


