Chapter 2

Adopting a Developmental Perspective in the Academy: Practices that Support and Enhance Student Learning

All our students struggle at some point during the undergraduate curriculum, and their learning is the collective responsibility of the entire institution, not just the specialized staff.

Cromwell et al. Thriving in Academe

This chapter examines the history of working with underprepared students in higher education in relation to contemporary challenges identified in Greater Expectations (AACU 2002). As this report points out: “At the heart of the Greater Expectations vision is the belief that everyone is entitled to an education of quality” (11). The report, which does not explicitly discuss developmental education, calls for a shift in national priorities away from access alone to two interconnected goals: “access to college learning of high quality for every student” and “appropriate preparation for all to succeed at this demanding level” (11). What practices support and enhance learning within the classroom and across an entire campus?

Evolving practice of developmental education

An account of the historical and continuing role played by developmental education in higher education shows how indispensable the field has been to the democratization of higher education and how reluctant higher education has been to acknowledge its contributions (McCabe and Day 1998). Brier offers this summary: “bridging the academic preparation gap has been a constant in the history of American higher education . . . and the controversy surrounding it is an American educational tradition” (Brier 1984, 2). The Roueches, who have written extensively on developmental education, reach this conclusion: “historically, programs for at-risk students were low status, low priority, and isolated on a college’s organizational chart” (Rouche and Rouche 1993, 71). Yet for people who believe democracy requires an educated citizenry where access to education is extended to everyone, the rationale for why developmental education belongs in higher education is found in the stories and numbers of people who arrive unprepared, persist in their studies, and graduate.

The history of developmental education in higher education also allows us to appreciate the origins and intended purposes of various curricular and pedagogical practices still in use and, given our times and aims, to evaluate whether they meet the Greater Expectations goal of appropriate preparation for college learning.

Overview of developmental education within higher education

Access to mainstream higher education has depended on a mix of factors from enabling federal legislation backed by funding incentives to political pressure created by citizens’ organizing efforts. At critical junctures in the push for greater access, various versions of “developmental education” became the only means for students, already admitted with tuition paid, to learn how to do college-level work. One of these first junctures occurred in 1862, when the
In 1902 the first independent public junior college in the country, Joliet Junior College, was established for students deemed academically and socially underprepared for university studies.

Morrill Land Grant Act made teaching and learning applied subjects such as business, agriculture, and technical programs a legitimate activity in higher education. The Act also extended access beyond the privileged few by guaranteeing admission to resident students from states that housed one of the new colleges (Brubacher and Rudy 1976). When these land grant institutions first opened, incoming freshmen—mostly 14-year-old boys—attended classes to learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills since their schooling had been limited by a public education system that did not include high school (Maxwell 1979). Students could not take regular college courses until they completed a “battery of courses” in college preparatory departments (Boylan and Saxon 1998). Known as the “people’s colleges,” these new land-grant institutions were not for all, despite their popular name: they excluded minorities and limited opportunities for women, and within a decade, most would move to selective admissions based on academic merit or promise (Roueche and Roueche 1993). When this first Morrill Land Grant Act was passed, only three historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) existed in the country. Despite their name, these early HBCUs mainly provided elementary and secondary schooling to black students who had very few or no opportunities to become educated.

When the Second Morrill Land Grant Act passed in 1890, states with racially segregated public higher education systems had to establish a land-grant institution for black students whenever a racially restricted land-grant institution was established for whites. Based on this requirement, sixteen black land-grant colleges were founded at border and southern states. These HBCUs mainly offered courses in agricultural, mechanical, and industrial subjects, not college-level courses and degrees (U.S. Department of Education 1991). In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Plessy v. Ferguson legitimized a “separate but equal” doctrine in public education and established two education systems for a racially divided public. The Plessy decision also called on HBCUs to provide training for black teachers who would teach in the segregated schools. The number of new land-grant institutions created throughout the country by the Second Morrill Act meant that more than half of the students admitted to higher education needed preparatory work.

A decade later, government-imposed admission quotas forced many higher education institutions to compete for students they did not really want. These “new” students were hardly tolerated at some institutions (Brier 1984). In 1902 the first independent public junior college in the country, Joliet Junior College, was established for students deemed academically and socially underprepared for university studies. By dividing four years into two distinct educational experiences, the junior college and the senior college, the “hordes” of high school students who wanted to continue their education could go directly to the junior college so universities could concentrate on preparing academically able and socially acceptable students for the professions (Zwerling 1976).

But even students who met universities’ admission requirements still had difficulties. In 1926, when one half of the freshmen at a prestigious university did not meet course requirements and 16 percent failed all their courses (Wyatt 1992), William F. Book created a groundbreaking How to Study course.
Convinced that students’ reading and study habits were the problem, not their lack of intelligence, he chose not to teach generic reading and study skills that clearly did not transfer to multiple content areas. Instead, he acknowledged the effort required to understand complex material, taught reading tied to disciplinary contexts, and expected students to use what they read in the world. Book also worked closely with students to develop study strategies that would help them overcome problems they experienced in their academic studies (Book 1927, cited in Roueche and Roueche 1993).

By 1929 the widespread introduction of general survey courses and lengthy reading assignments led to a proliferation of remedial reading clinics on many four-year campuses, including at Harvard in 1938; these clinics were modeled after their K-12 predecessors (Maxwell 1979). People taking pre-college-level courses, once referred to as “preparatory students,” became known as “remedial students.” While how-to-study courses of the day adopted some of Book’s ideas, the new remedial reading courses did not follow his lead despite evidence supporting the success of his approach. Instead, generic skills such as skimming, scanning, and vocabulary development—severed from meaningful content—continued to be taught.

The remedial reading clinics also sought to increase students’ reading rate by assigning eye movement and eye span exercises (Roueche and Roueche 1993), a practice still in use in some reading labs in higher education institutions in the 1980s. Established curriculum included a series of reading books, tied to K-12 grade levels, where students were timed on how long it took to read a brief passage, identical in length to all passages in the series. Their recorded time, combined with the number of questions about the passage answered correctly, “measured” reading readiness for college-level work. This approach that actively promotes surface learning and dissuades students and teachers from the more difficult work associated with reading for deep learning is still regarded, in some quarters, as an indicator of reading ability.

Fourteen years after Book created his How to Study curriculum, Mortimer Adler’s classic 1940 guide, *How to Read a Book*, outlined how imaginative literature, history, science and mathematics, philosophy, and the social sciences ought to be read given their disciplinary logic. As Adler points out in the preface to a new issue of his book “to achieve all the purposes of reading, the desideratum must be the ability to read different things at different—appropriate—speeds, not everything at the greatest possible speed” (Adler and Van Doren 1972, x).

In the mid-1930s, the idea that junior colleges should serve community educational needs through the provision of comprehensive adult education programs laid the foundation for the community college movement (Roueche and Roueche 1993). In 1947, the Truman Commission on Higher Education called for the establishment of locally controlled colleges so all citizens regardless of race, sex, religion, geographical location, or financial condition could benefit from postsecondary education to the fourteenth grade; this declaration spurred on the community college movement. “Access to everyone who can profit from instruction” became a founding principle of community colleges. These
institutions, many established by citizens’ movements and referred to as “democracy’s colleges,” attracted educators and community organizers who were prepared to work hard to democratize higher education. Highly publicized efforts to desegregate higher education, combined with growing international criticism of the treatment of African Americans, led to the inclusion of “race” in the list of factors that could no longer be a basis for excluding prospective students from higher education’s new colleges.

This explicit reference to race marked another turning point in African Americans’ long struggle, begun prior to the Civil War, for universal education as a necessary basis for freedom and citizenship. James D. Anderson notes that by 1866 more than five hundred schools existed in the Confederate states independent of and predating northern benevolent associations’ involvement or aid; this network had been organized by the educational collectives associated with the freedmen educational movement (Anderson 1988, 6-15). Despite a long-standing commitment in African American communities to learning and self-improvement, Anderson’s summary of the seventy-five-year period he studied bares a stark reality: “for the majority of black children in the South . . . not even public elementary schools were available. High schools were virtually non-existent, and the general unavailability of secondary education precluded even the opportunity to prepare for college” (285). When the “common schools crusade” from 1830 to 1860 made public elementary schools universally accessible to most American children, the exception was black children in the South who would not have any access to public elementary schools for another forty years until a “second crusade” occurred from 1900 to 1935. When American high schools were being transformed from elite private institutions to public schools from 1880 to the mid-1930s and the participation of high-school-aged children increased from less than 3 percent to 47 percent over a fifty-year period, southern local and state governments expanded the benefits of public secondary education only to white children. The very few black high schools that did exist were located in urban areas. As Anderson points out: “The treatment accorded black children during the transformation of American secondary education helps to disentangle general class discrimination from its more specific form of racial oppression. By the early 1930s, state-sponsored and state-funded building campaigns had made public secondary schools available to all classes of white children. Afro-Americans were generally excluded from the American and southern transformation of public secondary education” (187-88). This history explains how dramatic the victory was in 1935 when Thurgood Marshall, acting on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), successfully challenged one university that refused to admit a student to its law school based on race. In 1938 NAACP won another similar case, the second of many more that would challenge segregation in graduate and professional schools.

During World War II, the SQ3R study and reading strategy,3 still used currently in many campus reading and study skills labs, was developed to help servicemen enrolled in intensive eight-week courses retain information from college textbooks (Maxwell 1979). From 1944 to 1955, the G.I. Bill of Rights
made it possible for millions of ex-servicemen to go to college, and programs such as General Educational Development (GED) or Grade 12 Equivalency became widespread. Counseling provided study skills courses, and English and mathematics departments provided basic skills or “refresher courses” designed specifically for veterans. These courses also enrolled students with proven ability in some academic studies who needed “remediation” only in a specific area of academic work (Boylan and Saxon 1998). As the numbers of veterans declined, government-funded reading and study skills centers, tutoring services, and counseling centers became institutionalized for all students’ use (Maxwell 1979).

In the 1950s and 1960s, public universities combined selectivity with catch-up intersession and summer session preparation courses similar in design to those offered in the war years for able students who needed upgrading in a particular subject area (Roueche and Roueche 1993).

Organizing for civil rights throughout the 1950s and 1960s, specifically the campaign for an integrated school system from elementary, high school, and college to graduate and professional schools—along with the student movement for civil rights, had a profound impact on higher education and affected practice within developmental education. By 1950, NAACP decided to focus all legal battles on “obtaining education on a non-segregated basis” (Kluger 1975, 27). In December 1952, the Supreme Court heard five school segregation cases from South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, the District of Columbia, and Kansas, consolidated under the name of one case, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. In May 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously, “... in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Williams 1990, 131).

Most schools for blacks, though, “remained segregated with poorer facilities and budgets compared with traditionally white institutions” (U.S. Department of Education 1991, 3). This continued discrimination affected thousands of students. For instance, in 1953, public black colleges enrolled more than 43,000 students and around 32,000 more students were enrolled in smaller private colleges in the border and southern states and at HBCUs such as Fisk University, Hampton Institute, Howard University, Meharry Medical College, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Tuskegee Institute. When Congress passed Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to speed up the process of desegregating education by providing the means for ensuring equal opportunity in federally assisted programs and activities, racially segregated education systems still existed in nineteen states, a decade after the “separate but equal” doctrine was overturned.

The Brown Supreme Court decision followed by the Montgomery bus boycott and the active involvement of students in the Civil Rights Movement led Ella Baker, a grassroots organizer and the executive director of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference (SLCC), to call a conference for students in the spring of 1960 that would lead to the formation of an independent organization, the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee. The student-led and organized sit-in movement, freedom rides, and literacy campaign that was part of the drive to register voters in the South became the inspiration for widespread student-led changes in higher education, among these the Open Admissions Movement in...
within higher education, community colleges and developmental education programs both accepted and assumed the responsibility for ensuring that these students, now described as “non-traditional,” “disadvantaged,” and/or “remedial,” would be academically successful. 1970. This student activism—and the possibilities for equitable education—spilled into the academy. Many students, a number of whom would become teachers and developmental educators, were introduced to the critical and popular pedagogy associated with open education outside the academy including Native American traditional practices, post-emancipation schools, workers’ education programs, Highlander’s integrated workshops, and the grassroots civil rights’ Citizenship Schools along with international alternatives to formal schooling from literacy education in Brazil to folk schools in Denmark, study circles in Sweden, the frontier college in Canada, and the adult education movement in Britain.

For prospective students and their families, higher education’s accessibility is signaled by the cost of an education and the kind of financial aid available. The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided the financial means through Title IV aid for educationally disadvantaged, low-income groups, minorities, and women to further their education. Within higher education, community colleges and developmental education programs both accepted and assumed the responsibility for ensuring that these students, now described as “non-traditional,” “disadvantaged,” and/or “remedial,” would be academically successful. Equalization of opportunity expressed as an open door admissions policy ushered in what Cross (1976) refers to as the egalitarian, democratic era in higher education as compared to previous periods where access was based on merit or one’s elite status.

In this period of promise, findings from the first national study of remedial education shocked educators. In the research report Salvage, Redirection, or Custody? (1968), John Roueche could find no evidence that developmental education programs did anything to remedy student deficiencies. Although he admired community colleges’ commitment to “access for all,” his research revealed that as many as 90 percent of students who placed in remedial courses withdrew or failed, even on campuses where the courses were required. Was the open door in fact a revolving door? Other critiques would soon follow tempered by civil rights and open admissions issues: some studies identified inequitable practices that tracked students by class, race, and ethnicity away from academics into vocational programs or left students to languish in the academy, without support, until they decided themselves that they did not belong (Karabel 1972; Zwerling 1976; Brint and Karabel 1989).

The push for open admissions was not restricted to community colleges despite a Carnegie Commission recommendation to this effect. In 1970, student protests resulted in the implementation of open admission programs at The City University of New York (CUNY). All New York City high school graduates were eligible to attend any one of the CUNY campuses regardless of their previous academic standing. CUNY became a lighting rod for critiques, among these charges that the curriculum was in danger of being dumbed down and standards lowered. Yet CUNY’s open-admission students, who tested substantially lower than regularly admitted students when they first arrived, after one year’s work reached at least the verbal and mathematical skill levels attained initially by regularly admitted students (Rossman et al. 1975, cited in
Roueche and Roueche 1993, 123). Astin (1985) reviewed this study, confirmed its results, and drew attention to what developmental education practitioners already knew about most people in their classes: given appropriate resources and sufficient time, motivated yet underprepared students can develop the abilities to do college-level work.6

The CUNY results are all the more noteworthy in relation to the emerging consensus that new students did not “fit” easily into traditional practices, including those in developmental education: “remediation could not be approached by tackling poor study habits or teaching reading skills in isolation from other courses; the students were bringing an unbelievable variety of problems to the classroom that could not be addressed in a simplistic manner” (Roueche and Roueche 1993, 43). Practices historically associated with developmental education programs that served “privileged white males,” then “mostly white males” turned out to be wholly inadequate for a new set of student subpopulations, “non-traditional women and men, and federal legislative priority groups such as first generation college students, economically-disadvantaged students, and students of color” (Arendale 2002, 16). Many developmental programs, faced with a wildly disparate group of adult learners, adopted a competency-based mastery model of instruction. Based on proficiency test results, students “placed” at a particular level in a series of self-paced modules. Most commercially purchased programs divided processes such as reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning/calculating into discrete, sequential skill and sub-skill exercises. Students did exercises, completed quizzes, and took unit tests within an assigned “level.” If they reached mastery (85 percent of questions answered correctly), they moved on to the next “competency”; if not, they repeated a second version of the module.

Cross’s concern about higher education’s ineffectiveness in addressing the needs of “New Students,” her critique of a deficiency conception and related compensatory programs, and her insistence that we pay attention to the kind of education offered to these students originate in this highly controversial time. Maxwell wrote her insider’s account of developmental practice in the same period, “to fill the gap between liberals who eulogize the egalitarian goals of the college and conservatives who condemn all efforts to help students as ‘spoon-feeding’ and as ‘failures’” (Cross 1979, xi).

By the end of the 1970s, most two-year and many four-year institutions in the country, compelled by a mix of legislation, government funding, and political pressure—most certainly the Civil Rights Movement followed by the Open Admissions Movement—opened their doors, or had them pried open, to accommodate an influx of students destined to become the next millennium’s new majority on many campuses.

From a remedial to a developmental paradigm

In the 1970s, developmental educators, not immune to the debates of the day, began to articulate a new approach to working with underprepared students that did not focus narrowly on identifying “deficits” in students’ academic backgrounds. Milton Spann Jr. and Suella McCrimmon note that faculty working...
with academically at-risk college students did not like the pejorative connotations associated with the term “remedial education” and began to replace it with another: “The term developmental . . . focused on the student’s potential rather than the student’s deficit. Since the goal of developmental education is a fully developed and fully functioning person, focusing on academic skills alone is insufficient if students are to make the transition to all-around effective students and involved citizens” (Spann Jr., and McCrimmon 1998, 41). As Boylan and Saxon indicate, the change was also predicated on the growing scholarship on human growth and intellectual and social development made known through the work of Piaget, Bruner, Kohlberg, and Perry:

A variety of noncognitive or “developmental” factors . . . were also discovered to be of critical importance to academic success. These additional factors included such things as locus of control, attitudes toward learning, self-concept, autonomy, ability to seek help, and a host of other influences having nothing to do with students’ intellect or academic skill. By the late 1970s, educators who worked with underprepared students developed an entirely new paradigm to guide their efforts. Instead of assuming that students were simply deficient in academic skills and needed to have these deficiencies remediated, they began to assume that personal and academic growth were linked—that the improvement of academic performance was tied to improvement in students’ attitudes, values, and beliefs about themselves, others, and the educational environment . . . This new model involved the teaching of basic skills combined with assessment, advising, counseling, tutoring, and individualized learning experiences designed not just to reteach basic content, but also to promote student development. (Boylan and Saxon 1998, 7-8)

The changes Boylan and Saxon name correspond to a broader, holistic understanding of students’ needs as described by Maxwell, Cross, and, in 1998 Martha Casazza.7

Cross clarifies what this shift represents for student learning by differentiating between the purpose of a remedial program, “to overcome academic deficiencies,” and the purpose of a developmental program, “to give attention to the fullest possible development of talent and to develop strengths as well as to correct weaknesses” (1976, 31). The distinction, drawn with practitioners in mind, invites us to think more deeply about the process of learning and how we learn best. To return to Tagg’s example of the toddler learning to walk, do we frame the toddler’s fall as a basis for designing curriculum and instructional practice or do we frame the process of learning to walk, both falling down and getting up?

David Arendale’s account of two innovative practices—Learning Assistance Centers and Supplemental Instruction—illuminates the difference between remedial and developmental perspectives. Both these initiatives, created at American universities in the early 1970s, quickly spread to other universities and community colleges throughout the country and internationally.
Arendale credits the Learning Assistance Center (LAC) model, developed by Frank Christ from California State University, Long Beach, with moving developmental programs away from a focus on remedial services for a subpopulation of remedial students toward a more comprehensive approach designed to enhance and enrich learning for all students on campus. From the outset, in contrast to reading laboratories and academic support services of the day, Christ insisted on the comprehensive nature of LAC and its theory-based developmental orientation while “vigorously opposing any stigma that it was ‘remedial’ and only for inadequately prepared, provisionally admitted, or probationary students” (Christ 1997, 1-2, as cited in Arendale 2002, 17). It would be housed in one central and accessible facility, designed to meet multiple purposes: all students could use LAC resources including tutorial assistance and a library of basic study aids to get higher grades. The LAC would also be a referral service to helping agencies; a training center for paraprofessionals, peer counselors, and tutors; and a center for faculty development.

The second example, Supplemental Instruction (SI), developed by Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1973, targets high risk courses rather than students, a radical turnabout from a deficit approach (Martin and Arendale 1994). Without money to create a comprehensive LAC and in a state where four-year institutions were prohibited from providing developmental courses, Martin, a doctoral student in reading instruction, used data from a national survey of learning center directors to develop an approach that would avoid the common problems they named:

Services were ancillary to the institution; standardized tests were insufficient to predict students who needed assistance; services were often provided too late to help students; students did not have time or money to enroll in additional developmental courses; students displayed difficulty in transferring study strategies to the academic content courses; individual tutoring was expensive; students often did not avail themselves of services for fear of being stigmatized; and evaluation of learning services was inadequate. (Arendale 2002, 18)

Martin shepherded a very different idea through the bureaucracy: target high-risk courses (those with a 30 percent or higher rate of D or F final course grades and course withdrawals, e.g., algebra, chemistry, anatomy) and recruit students who did well in the course to help incoming students. These able students would attend classes with new students, model good study habits, work with the instructor to identify key concepts and skills, and lead three or more regularly scheduled, out-of-class study sessions each week for all students enrolled. At these peer-facilitated sessions, students would discuss ideas related to the course and work collaboratively on problems and assignments. By 1983, the success of SI became known outside developmental education and outside the country. By 1999, Arendale reported that within the United States, “more than a quarter million students participate in SI during each academic term . . . and research studies have consistently replicated the findings that SI is a cost effective
program that contributes to increased academic achievement, persistence, and graduation rates” (Arendale 2002, 21).

Both of these initiatives, along with others, recast the role that developmental education—now alert to students’ abilities and potential not their deficits—could play in the academy. Some campuses established comprehensive community-based continuing education, adult education, and developmental education programs from literacy up to college preparation that included well-articulated connections among basic skills instruction, English as a Second Language, life experience courses, and introductory college-level courses. Other campuses experimented with an abilities-based approach to teaching, learning, and assessment within broad skill areas such as critical thinking, reading, and writing across the curriculum, or within subject specific areas such as the sciences and mathematics. Faculty in composition and communication wrestled with how to restructure writing instruction with attention to issues of language and identity brought to the fore at CUNY during the open admissions era (Fox 1999; Kates 2001). By the mid-to-late 1980s, some community colleges and universities, often using SI and LAC, began to experiment with different learning community models within developmental education or between developmental education and college level studies.

Other campuses experimented with an abilities-based approach to teaching, learning, and assessment within broad skill areas such as critical thinking, reading, and writing across the curriculum, or within subject specific areas such as the sciences and mathematics.

Research-based best practices

After the disappointing results of the first 1968 national study where Roueche concludes that “intuition rather than research appears to be the basis for most remedial programs” (Roueche 1968, 42), evaluation of developmental programs began to replace anecdotal evidence. Within the developmental education field there is now a robust literature on research-based best practices (e.g., Boylan 2002; Casazza and Silverman 1996; McCabe 2000, 2003; Roueche and Roueche 1993; 1999).

In High Stakes, High Performance: Making Remedial Education Work the Roueches point out that successful programs for academically underprepared students “marry” two goals that critics argue are mutually exclusive—access and academic excellence (1999, 43). They invite institutions to study exemplary program models, adapt approaches to their campus circumstances, and evaluate their work based on explicitly stated aims and results achieved, not “efforts made.” The Roueches emphasize a proactive institutional commitment to at-risk students’ academic success as the following précis of their key recommendations and conclusions indicates.

a) Provide a holistic approach to programs for at-risk students: Successful programs involve intentional collaborative efforts from multiple areas of the campus including financial aid (tuition, support for child care, and transportation), counseling, and advising: “A successful learning lab, a strong reading program, or an excellent mathematics program, if offered as a stand alone instructional service or class, falls far short of the broader institutional commitment that colleges must make” (46).

b) Abolish voluntary placement in remedial courses: Successful programs assess entering students’ academic abilities and, based on these results, ensure that students are academically prepared to do college-level work: “ . . . motivation
cannot replace missing or inadequate skill development, assessment tests are valid indicators of more serious deficiencies, and adulthood is not a ‘free pass’ to every course in the college curriculum” (48).

c) Create a more seamless web: Cooperation between sending and receiving institutions at critical transition points from high school to college, and community and technical colleges to four-year institutions are regarded as critical arenas for educational reform: “... direct interventions to provide support and direction should not be abandoned by one institution before they are assumed by another. Collaboration and strong linking mechanisms are critical to successful transition” (51).

These points are included in McCabe’s recommendations to public decision-makers and community college leaders (2000a).

In Accent on Learning, Cross established early benchmarks for best practices in developmental classrooms based on a review of thirty years of research on working with underprepared students. She presented her findings as a series of recommendations for designing effective programs and curricula. Three key points underscore her recommendations, and these continue to surface in more current summaries of best practices. Like Book, Cross insists “skills training must be integrated into the other college experiences of the student.” She supports this recommendation with overwhelming evidence that “transfer of training” does not occur automatically. Emphasizing theory- and research-based program design, she recommends that practitioners be flexible and open-minded about curricular and pedagogical practices until “more is known.” She uses the example of skill development to underscore this point: “We do not even know which skills developed to what level are important to academic survival ...” (Cross 1976, 42-45). Cross also argues that degree credit should be granted for remedial classes since this initial “reward” encourages student persistence.

In What Works (2002), Hunter Boylan summarizes the twenty-five-year period following the synthesis done by Cross. He defines “best practices” as the organizational, administrative, instructional, counseling, advising, and tutoring activities engaged in by highly successful developmental programs and names thirty-three distinct practices. Practitioners and educators knowledgeable about the field will recognize in his summary the broad contours on which the particulars of good teaching and learning are grounded.

Various research studies contribute to the picture that emerges. An outstanding feature of effective programs is an explicit developmental philosophy where the “whole” learner is placed at the center of practice; respect and empathy for learners is a central and unifying value (Casazza and Silverman 1996; Donovan 1974; Kiemig 1983). Exemplary programs challenge students. As Cross observed in Beyond the Open Door (1971), “the teacher who accepts poor performance (basically because he or she does not think the student can do better—or thinks that because of past injustices the student should not have to do better) is doing a grave disservice to New Students. In the final analysis, the teacher who cares must have enough teaching skill and enough confidence in the student to create the environment and situations that require the student’s best
Successful programs use trained peer tutors and integrate laboratories offering tutoring and self-paced computerized instruction with classroom activities (Boylan et al. 1992; McCabe 2000a). An adult learning environment, a committed staff knowledgeable about research on learning and learning problems, ongoing assessment of students’ learning, systematic program evaluation, administrative support, and stable funding are also essential components of effective programs (Noel et al. 1985).

The quality of instruction has the most impact on students’ academic performance (Boylan et al. 1992). In *What Works*, Boylan notes: “Instructors cannot control students’ social or economic backgrounds nor can they have much influence on their work or home life. But they can control what is done in the classroom . . . quality of instruction refers not only to delivery methods but also to classroom organization, management, and environment” (2002, 68). Among the twelve models, methods, and techniques he identifies that contribute to the quality of instruction, “develop learning communities” tops the list of practices. The recognized advantages include: the mutual support a community offers its members (Astin 1993); increased retention and improved student grades (Tinto 1997); improved student attitudes toward learning (Tinto 1994); and dramatic increases in student persistence (McCabe and Day 1998). A number of the techniques and methods named in this instructional practices section are part of learning community pedagogy, among these the use of classroom assessment techniques and active collaborative learning strategies as well as the intentional development of students’ critical thinking and analytical abilities. Other models named in this section invite practitioners to “use supplemental instruction” and “use mastery learning.”

Missing from the acknowledged benefits of learning communities has been the hallmark of all learning community work: *integrative learning that is academically rigorous, engaging, and inclusive of all students’ experience*. To realize this aim is the raison d’être of learning community work more than improving retention and persistence, although these are welcome byproducts. In fact, current accounts of best practices in developmental education do not address curricular issues, the “what” of learning. If we recall Adelman’s research, the intensity and quality of high school curriculum is the critical factor in students’ successful transition from secondary school to college level work and eventual degree completion. While developmental education programs do not base developmental curricula or instructional practices on a secondary school model, the pivotal importance of curriculum cannot be ignored. Within higher education, developmental education serves as an abbreviated and intense transition to college-level work—an academic apprenticeship, if you like, for people who need to develop the cluster of abilities and habits of mind associated with academic success. To reorient students’ approaches to learning, which is the distinctive work of developmental education (Cross 1971), we need to be attentive to the “what” of learning; an education of quality is about *something*. 
Shifting from deficit to research-based developmental curriculum

How do we know if students are appropriately prepared to do intellectually demanding work, a telling measure of a developmental program’s effectiveness? Do students need to work on basic skills before they move on to demanding, substantive learning associated with college-level studies and learning communities or can students do both at the same time? These questions are not new but they focus attention on the shifting curricular and pedagogical ground that moving from a deficit to a developmental conceptual framework entails. Indeed, a current debate among developmental faculty at one Washington state community college on whether developmental students should participate in a book seminar planned for an entire campus brings to mind the bold decision that led to the Declaration of Human Rights becoming the core curriculum for Citizenship Schools. At this college, though, opposing views about students’ participation is one of those flash points that can be especially illuminating if educators dare to broach the hard conversation on how we might prepare all students to participate fully and confidently in the intellectual and moral life of a community, at college and beyond.

Grubb and his colleagues, through their inside look at community colleges in Honored But Invisible (1999), established what good practice does not look like. In many developmental classrooms, curriculum that patronizes adult learners is still in place, from skill and drill exercises that numb the mind to workbooks full of trivial math problems, dull reading passages, and uninspiring writing assignments. Students keen to begin college-level work slog through curriculum that turns learning into pointless drudgery. Clearly, instructional practice lags behind research on learning and effective developmental education programs. Like other areas of the academy, we can find “best and worst” cases, but, as Maxwell observed twenty-five years ago, only the most capable students survive second-class learning. Whenever faculty development on research-based good practices is short-changed, students bear the cost.

From decontextualized skills to recontextualized abilities

From the perspective of a teacher, the shift from a deficit to a research-based developmental curriculum requires a fundamental rethinking of established practices, specifically a shift away from an emphasis on creating curriculum based on decontextualized skills to curriculum aimed at preparing students for college-level work where skillful learning is highly contextualized. Students need to develop the abilities associated with “learning how to learn” in multiple and varied contexts—a key learning goal of curriculum aimed at preparing students for college-level work.

Students who insist on knowing how the learning of generic skills will help them succeed at college prompt us to rethink established practice. The first students I taught in a developmental studies program in the early 1980s, demoralized by placement results indicating between fifth-to-eighth-grade reading levels, demanded to know how this reading class would help them succeed at college. My students’ anxiety and outright anger about the placement tests as well as my previous experience teaching undergraduates in university settings and adults in community-based, popular education programs led us down
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Since students in my class had very different career and educational goals in mind—and without the option of integrating this developmental class with a college-level course—I focused classroom work on a topic-based inquiry so the development of essential academic skills would occur in the context of learning something significant and substantive over time. My own undergraduate experience in an interdisciplinary program served as a source of inspiration as did my experience teaching sociology. Since students’ engagement was critical, I decided to use a participatory research methodology to construct a curriculum that would focus on a contentious public issue that affected people’s personal lives. The class chose the then impending free trade agreement between the United States and Canada. We brainstormed a list of questions people cared about from losing jobs to employment opportunities over time to the possible loss of indigenous industry and a national identity. Students collected and read articles on free trade from multiple perspectives and with varying degrees of reading difficulty; they wrote papers identifying arguments for and against free trade, worked out the math behind some predications, and came up with more questions for further inquiry. They sought out the views of experts and people they disagreed with and became recognized authorities among their friends. Toward the end of the semester, the class participated in a college-wide forum where they raised issues regarding the moral and ethical implications of free trade for underdeveloped countries before these concerns had become a matter of public debate.

By choosing a single topic for inquiry that bridged people’s everyday lives and college learning, I hoped to convey both the challenge involved in doing intellectual work and to demystify how people actually learn a specialized vocabulary, become knowledgeable about issues, appreciate different perspectives, struggle with complex ideas, write about what they know, and so on. We paid attention to the skills and strategies students used, and experimented with different approaches that might be more effective. Students became engaged in a critical reflective inquiry about their own approaches to learning. We concluded that people become knowledgeable not because they are smarter than other people but because they study something in depth, in an intellectually disciplined way, in the company of others, with many opportunities for practicing skills that are a means for learning and collaborating on projects, not ends in themselves. The public evidence that these students knew more than other students in “real” college classes about a national issue tipped the balance in favor of learner agency and empowerment. They knew they could do college-level work because they had done college-level work.

The point in sharing this teaching experience is this: learning something substantive is appropriate for all learners if less confident students and their teachers figure out how students’ abilities that are everywhere in evidence outside school can be “translated” to an academic context. A developmental curricular track other than the competency-based mastery model that informed the existing reading curriculum. This teaching experience, briefly summarized below, illustrates one approach to designing a curriculum that brings students’ existing abilities to the fore and “recontextualizes” them in relation to expectations associated with demanding college level work.

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perspective begins by analyzing students’ existing abilities as readers, writers, thinkers, and users of mathematical reasoning. Recontextualizing complex abilities in an academic setting or activating often overlooked “prior knowledge” gives students a firmer foundation for further learning at college. This view is predicated on the assumption that people in developmental classes are able learners and thinkers outside the academy who, with practice, can become able learners in academic contexts (Gibbs 1992; Smilkstein 2002).

For high-risk students, a critical orientation to higher education includes developing the abilities required to intellectually navigate the multiple subcultures of the academy—an orientation that is as essential as one that helps students locate and use campus support services and learning resources. The challenge of how we can support students’ efforts to become their own able translators and navigators is the essence of developmental work.

The attraction of pairing a developmental course with a course students struggle with offers developmental educators circumstances similar to those in which Book developed his successful How to Study course and the Supplemental Instruction model was created. The anticipated and actual difficulties students experience in their college studies “shapes” the curriculum.

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From “inherited” practice to research-based pedagogy

Like other areas of the academy, many developmental education programs are slow to change even if established practices run counter to research and a program’s effectiveness is questioned, as is the case with developmental reading courses. Here, the stakes are especially high since so many entering students do not read at college level. In A Commentary on the Current State of Developmental Reading Programs, Martha Maxwell notes that developmental reading courses have been impervious to change. 12 She refers to content analysis research that indicates that the more than 500 reading textbooks published since the 1890s tend to reproduce patterns of previous textbooks including an emphasis on skill instruction: comprehension, vocabulary, reading rate, and study skills. She asks, “If developmental courses give students nothing important to read about and nothing to write about that remotely resembles college work, how can they hope to improve?”(1998, 162).

Maxwell is not an advocate of forced placement in developmental classes where negative effects include decreased self-confidence, low morale, and increased dropouts, even though she acknowledges that many students need to improve their reading skills. If this is the goal, the numerous studies she cites indicate that developmental reading classes are ineffective. Unlike Adelman (1999) whose research also confirms this finding, Maxwell does not share his conclusion that students who place in developmental reading classes have comprehensive literacy problems that are best addressed at community colleges, not four-year institutions. Instead, she marshals evidence from a variety of studies, which shows that high-risk students who take mainstream courses have higher reading scores, retention rates, and better grades than their counterparts who take developmental reading courses. Ironically, students in mainstream classes read a lot more and in greater depth than they typically do in developmental reading classes. Maxwell also highlights research on
psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology that ought to lead to a rethinking of reading curriculum and instruction:

Reading was thought to be a linear process so that one progressed from easier skills (such as reading for facts) to the more complex skill of critical reading. We know now that reading is discipline-specific and skills learned in one genre may not transfer to other academic fields. . . . Most authorities no longer believe that meaning lies in the text and that the teacher’s job is to see that students understand the author’s meaning. Psycholinguistic theory argues that reading and writing are modes of learning and share common purposes and processes. That is, they are ways that students construct meaning or ways of thinking and knowing. Reading involves an interaction between a learner’s prior knowledge, text, and context; reading and writing are viewed as a single act of literacy that should be taught together. (Maxwell 1998, 160)

Maxwell is clearly in favor of pairing developmental reading and developmental writing courses but she also emphasizes curricular integration that is consonant with a learning community approach to developmental education: “Historically, the most successful model for high risk students who enter college with limited reading skills involves a core of intensive, interdepartmental courses that are team-taught and include reading, writing, mathematics and a mainstream course, usually in social science” (163). As in her 1979 guide, Maxwell continues to call for counseling to be integrated into this core as well as adjunct and Supplemental Instruction courses.

Addressing fragmented curriculum

Greater Expectations identifies the fragmentation of the curriculum as an especially daunting “barrier to quality” and the first-class learning envisioned for all students (2002, 16). Curricular coherence, a longstanding issue throughout higher education, is one that the Roueches (1999) also emphasize when evaluating developmental programs.

The sheer numbers of students attending college, their diversity, and chaotic attendance patterns exacerbate an old problem—one where a fragmented curriculum leaves students patching together an undergraduate education based on disconnected but available courses. The added factor is that today’s students are on the move from institution to institution, taking courses in the traditional classrooms and online, with sometimes long interruptions between attending school and leaving. What are the possibilities of acquiring an education of quality in this highly atomized system where the division of knowledge into distinct fields is only one complaint? Less confident students often retreat from continuing college when faced with so many choices that do not seem to “go anywhere.” Or, they gravitate to professional and technical programs that are internally coherent but have high dropout rates in threshold courses and low pass rates throughout the program.

The call for curricular coherence occurs in the context of a broad aim, a seamless education of quality for all students from kindergarten to graduate
studies. To even articulate a developmental “education of quality” that is embraced by an entire campus is an ambitious project—the equivalent of designing an integrative curriculum for the kind of “Learning Paradigm College” (2003) Tagg envisions. We turn briefly to one approach that is integral to designing learning communities from a developmental perspective; this approach invites us to examine what students are learning “in here” (developmental classes) in relation to requirements “out there” (intended programs and courses and/or the world outside the academy).

**Articulating the developmental stages of an undergraduate education**

The basis for collaboratively identifying “a developmental sequence . . . the kingpin of developmental theory” (Cross 1976, 158) is faculty expertise about students’ learning based on an analysis of students’ work. The language of designing curriculum—the difference between what we want students to know and be able to do and what they already know and do—is drawn from an influential paradigm in education, pioneered by Alverno College faculty (1994) and founded on a developmental and abilities-based approach to teaching, learning, and assessment.

The work of Alverno, a four-year urban college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is not mentioned in the developmental education literature on best practices even though what characterizes exemplary developmental programs is practiced not only in its College Transition Program but also throughout Alverno. Moreover, by far the majority of Alverno’s students—mature adults with busy lives, many of whom did not complete high school and 38 percent of whom are from minority communities—would be tagged “high risk” with little if any chance of success. At Alverno most of these students meet the college’s high expectations and graduate, a number continue their studies, and many are active in their communities.

Tim Riordan, one co-author of *Working with Underprepared Students* (Cromwell et al. 2003), offers an insight into Alverno’s developmental philosophy by describing his experience when he bought his first computer. He knew what a computer was and he had worked on one, but the questions and comments of a helpful salesperson were in a language he didn’t understand. “In effect,” he writes, “I was ‘underprepared’ and I felt totally inept, even embarrassed.” Riordan compares his experience to that of students new to his discipline, philosophy, where a short story or a novel is often a better way to introduce students to philosophical questions than explicit philosophical texts. Achieving facility with a discipline is a developmental process where students acquire a specialized language, knowledge, habits of mind, and the ability to practice the discipline over time: “One of our educational assumptions at Alverno is that learning is a developmental process and that our design and practice of teaching should reflect that.”

The essence of Alverno’s educational work is expressed in the college’s mission: the personal growth and intellectual development of each person. This collective responsibility and mission applies to all students, no matter the skills and abilities they bring to college. In turn, incoming students know “learning how to learn is a serious part of student work” (ibid.).
Alverno arrived at its distinctive abilities-based approach by way of a financial crisis in the late 1960s and the wisdom of its then president, Sister Joel Read, who believed the college could reinvent itself. She set aside time for people to meet every Friday afternoon to address two questions: As a community, what do we want Alverno graduates to know and be able to do in the world? What practices from your discipline/program are indispensable to the kind of undergraduate education imagined? This casting of education into the world led to the naming of eight generic abilities and, over time, the development of a culture where students learn to accurately self-assess these abilities in relation to explicit criteria and standards, and received feedback from faculty, peers, and external assessors (Alverno College Faculty 2000). Assessment and self-assessment continues throughout the undergraduate years as students reach levels associated with beginning, developing, and then advanced learning, Alverno faculty’s supportive language for distinct stages of accomplishment.

An adaptable developmental model for designing curriculum

Countless faculty from schools, colleges, and universities—including many developmental educators—have worked with their own course materials at Alverno’s Summer Institutes to figure out how to recast teaching and assessment practices using a developmental framework. The multi-layered, developmental model used by Alverno College faculty serves as a reference point. Like all highly contextualized and successful models, though, the approach is based on an analysis of Alverno’s own students’ learning. For instance, the descriptors for beginning, developing, and advanced work are what interdisciplinary teams of Alverno faculty who serve in one of eight across-the-curriculum ability groups regard as the developmental stages in their students’ learning; discipline groups also articulate a developmental sequence in relation to their students’ ability to understand and use disciplinary knowledge. While details are not transferable to other campus cultures, Alverno’s developmental approach is not limited to working with underprepared students nor do faculty imagine that students will only experience difficulties in their first year at college. Among the key features of Alverno’s developmental perspective, the following are especially significant for designing integrative learning opportunities for developmental and other students.

a) Make expectations for student learning explicit: Alverno’s curriculum is articulated in relation to over-arching abilities or expectations for graduates. In turn, these are embedded in expectations for the majors and professional/technical degrees. Here, the naming and articulation of expectations is the critical factor. The question what do we want students to know and be able to do at the end of a developmental program or a course or a learning community focuses thinking on key conceptions, abilities, habits of mind, skills, and attitudes that are valued.

b) Build on students’ existing abilities: Abilities-based learning invites an analysis of students’ existing abilities, the foundation for new learning. In the context of developmental education, we are interested in what someone knows what to do as a reader, as a writer, and as a user of mathematics in
their everyday lives. Effective developmental curriculum and teaching map new learning onto students’ existing abilities that at first glance do not ‘fit’ academic culture. Assessment at the outset is crucial.

c) **Identify beginning, developing, and advanced performance:** The distinctions Alverno uses to articulate developmental stages in learning stand in sharp contrast to a deficit model. What differentiates beginning work from developing work and this work from advanced work or, for instance, reading and writing in upper-level developmental courses as compared to college entry-level courses? What in our teaching and assessment practices create conditions for students to “move” from one developmental stage to the next? An examination of students’ actual work by faculty determines these distinctions.

d) **Teach students to self-assess their learning:** Students’ practice of self-assessment and self-reflection, a motivator for learning, is also developmental at Alverno. For instance, the importance of learning goals such as the “use of feedback” and “commitment to improvement” is reinforced within a campus culture that regards assessment as student learning. To move from a fear of external evaluation to learning motivated by one’s own accurate self-assessment represents a fundamental shift toward independent, empowered learning. What are the conditions that support this kind of learner agency? Self-assessment is a critical component of learning how to learn.

e) **Develop assignments where students need to use what they know:** A distinction made by faculty between possessing knowledge and using knowledge focuses attention on evidence of learning that is “authentic”; students use what they know in “real” situations. For instance, the ability to take notes in lectures is developed by attending lectures, taking notes, and using those notes to do a “practice” in-class quiz. Math is more deeply understood through practical application and problem-based learning where numbers, for instance, are tied to a state’s economic forecast, proposed budget cuts, and related tuition increases—an opportunity for students to become knowledgeable about decisions that affect their well-being and that of their families and communities.

The generative power of a developmental perspective is further illustrated by the example of a faculty-directed statewide project to identify faculty expectations related to reading, writing, mathematics, student responsibility, observing, listening, and speaking. The College-Ready Project in Washington state involves developmental and college level faculty from thirty-two community and technical colleges. One data source included a faculty survey based on the heuristic, “what should students know and be able to do.” The responses from approximately 950 instructors who teach college-entry courses led to the development of a framework that outlines college-ready abilities or strategies. The project has evolved to include creating rubrics for assessing outcomes, designing assessments, and collecting faculty assignments and students’ work.
We will return to how a developmental and abilities-based approach to teaching and assessment can inform the design of learning communities in a subsequent discussion of learning community models. For now, we note that adopting a developmental perspective on learning throughout the academy welcomes and makes room for underprepared learners; it builds on students’ existing abilities and assets; it renders obsolete the language of deficits and exclusion. It also compels us to act on the charge of our times: to find ways to include differently prepared students in demanding college level learning environments with the support they need to be successful. The next chapter hones in on this question.

Endnotes

1. See Smith, et al. forthcoming, for a history of the policy debates in this area in the last twenty-five years.

2. The National Association for Developmental Education defines developmental education as “any organized collection of courses and/or services designed to help underprepared students succeed.” See its website for a more detailed definition of developmental education as a field of practice and research within higher education http://www.nade.net.

3. SQ3R is an acronym for a five-step reading strategy: survey or overview text, question, read, (w)rite, review.

4. See Roots of Open Education in America (1976), Ruth Dropkin and Arthur Tobier, eds., which also includes personal accounts of Yiddish schules, settlement houses, residential schools, the first day-care programs, and Early Progressive Schools.

5. Title IV student aid programs are founded on the premise that family members (the student, the student’s spouse, and parents) have the primary responsibility to pay for higher education to the extent of their ability to pay.

6. See Phyllis van Slyck’s current account of LaGuardia Community College-CUNY’s New Student House program for at-risk incoming students in Section Two.

7. Casazza discusses the implications for student learning of other developmental theorists’ work such as Freire, Vygotsky, Bruffee, Mezirow, and Baxter-Magolda.

8. For example the current National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) motto reflects a conception of developmental education that is not bound by a single department or particular group of students: “developmental education helps underprepared students prepare, prepared students advance, and advanced students excel.”

9. LACs also provided a rationale for housing, under one roof, the multiple small-grant support programs created for students after the 1960s civil rights legislation.

10. In 1981, SI became certified as an Exemplary Educational Program by the U.S. Department of Education based on two criteria: improved academic achievement, i.e., students participating in SIs consistently received higher course grades; and improved student behaviors and attitudes, i.e., specifically lower withdrawal rates from target classes and higher rates of...
persistence toward graduation. In the United Kingdom, SIs are known as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and in Australia, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). See http://www.umkc.edu/cad/si.

11. Many students in developmental classes missed high school curriculum because they were assigned to special classes; often, their preferred learning mode was not part of teachers’ instructional repertoires.

12. Maxwell is a reading specialist; the first university English course she taught in the late 1940s was called “Reading Improvement” (Maxwell 1979).

13. See *Greater Expectations* (2002, 33) for a succinct account of the learning desired and related “facilitating strategies.”

14. This project is co-led by developmental faculty members Teresa Massey and Pam Dusenberry. For more information contact project coordinator, Anna Sue McNeill, amcneill@sbctc.ctc.edu.