

# Introduction

## The Pedagogy of Possibilities: Developmental Education, College-Level Studies, and Learning Communities

*Coming here turned my life around. We went on a field trip to the university and I realized . . . I could go there. If you work hard, ask for help, support each other, then we'll all make it.*

J., a student from Pasadena City College's  
*Teaching and Learning Communities Bridge Program*

Rising college attendance, falling completion rates, and a national dialogue on what is and is not working in higher education—the findings summarized eloquently in *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U 2002)—leads to a question that informs this monograph on learning communities for people unprepared and new to college-level studies: what kind of learning environments will both support and challenge students so more of them can meet our “greater expectations” while realizing their own? Learning communities are one response.

The monograph's title, *The Pedagogy of Possibilities*, intentionally brings to the fore people's high hopes and big dreams. The promise of an open door is about possibilities. Yet, we also know that many people's lives put them “at risk” in higher education even before they attend a college class.

We will examine what being at risk in higher education means in detail later on, but J., the young man quoted above, would certainly qualify. His story is similar to many of his classmates who live in the poorest neighborhood in their community college district. The first from their families to graduate from high school and to attend college, they serve as role models for brothers and sisters. Their stories illustrate the immense pressure they are under to be successful. Yet the fact that these young adults did not do well at school in the past is a defining marker. The odds are against J. and his peers “making it” at college. But they are also part of the first cohort to complete Pasadena City College's .XL summer bridge learning community, a doorway into the first-year experience teaching and learning communities program (TLC) that has been designed to help Hispanic and other underprepared students move successfully from basic skills to transfer and vocational programs.<sup>1</sup>

During the half-day I spent in the company of these students as part of a National Learning Communities Project site visit, I became more hopeful about higher education's possibilities. If these bright young women and men, and other students like them, can thrive and excel in their studies at campuses where we teach and work, then all students might ultimately benefit. Keen to learn, excited about the projects they are working on, and deeply appreciative of classmates' and TLC.XL faculty and staff's support, these students offer unsolicited evidence that education can be transformative and empowering.

In today's knowledge-based economy, with few exceptions, everyone belongs in college. Yet, the faculty members who confide to the authors of *Honored But Invisible: An Inside Look At Teaching in Community Colleges* (Grubb 1999) that students struggling in the back of their classes are not “college material,” voice a concern that is not new in higher education. Students in the first college preparatory program in reading, writing, and mathematics established at the University of Wisconsin in 1849 provoked similar objections

(Brier 1984), even though the country's system of public schools<sup>2</sup> did not extend beyond the primary grades (Maxwell 1979). By 1865, 88 percent of this university's 331 students were enrolled in preparatory classes and only forty-one attended regular classes (Brubacher and Rudy 1976). Although the university eventually abolished its college preparatory program following intense attacks, other higher education institutions established similar programs to bridge the "academic preparation gap" (Brier 1984), a signal that higher education was no longer the prerogative of the sons of the very wealthy.

Colleges and universities have been providing academic support services for students less prepared than their classmates for more than a century and a half. From the early 1900s to the present, around 30 percent of all students entering colleges and universities have been developmental students (Boylan and White 1987; Roueche and Roueche 1993; McCabe 2000). During this time, the percentage of campuses offering preparatory, remedial, or developmental programs has been relatively constant. At the turn of the twentieth century, 84 percent of all colleges and universities in the country offered college preparatory programs (Abraham 1987); in 1915, 80 percent of institutions did so (Brubacher and Rudy 1976). In the 1980s and 1990s a similar percentage of institutions had learning assistance services and developmental education programs. During this same period, the National Study of Developmental Education estimated that 70 percent of four-year institutions and more than 90 percent of two-year institutions offered developmental courses (Boylan et al. 1992). In 1996, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 78 percent of colleges and universities ran developmental courses. Current figures follow this pattern.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the presence of developmental programs and services at open admission two- and four-year campuses does not mean that new and underprepared students are viewed as legitimate members of the higher education community, even where the democratization of education is part of a founding ethos. For instance, in the community college sector that prides itself on making it possible for the poor, the working-class, and ethnic and racial minorities to become educated, the title of a study, *The Contradictory College* (Dougherty 1994), reflects inconsistent practices from one institution to another and among various subcultures within an institution. The instructors Grubb and his colleagues interview in *Honored But Invisible*, who decide some students don't belong in college, believe it is part of their job to dissuade people who "lack ability" from continuing academic studies. Other instructors make an effort to reassure students, as does this instructor who teaches in professional and technical programs: "I will tell the students when they first come to class, 'I don't care what area we are in, if you take me out of my environment and put me in your area, I would be all thumbs until I caught on. It's not that I don't have the intelligence to do it.' It's the same way in the classroom" (1999, 173). This mixed response to underrepresented students in higher education is evident from research findings: some institutional and instructional practices reinforce societal inequality where students new to academic culture, especially working-class students, are sorted into career and vocational tracks that "cool out" their aspirations (Brint and Karabel 1989; Zwerling 1976; Rhoads and Valdez 1996);

other studies describe exemplary programs and practices designed to empower students who arrive “differently prepared”<sup>4</sup> to the academy (Shaw 1997). Learning communities are emerging as a way of addressing some of these contradictions (Fogarty, Dunlap et al. 2003).

Worthy institutional mission statements can translate into multiple, competing goals in practice: broaden access, encourage diversity, uphold academic standards, increase retention rates. Developmental education—charged with the responsibility of keeping the open door open by ensuring that admitted students eventually become “ready” for college-level work—is often a battleground for working through an institution’s conflicting purposes and practices. As Hunter Boylan points out in *What Works* (2002), a summary of more than twenty-five years of research-based practice in developmental education, faculty complaints that students do not belong at college and advisors’ recommendations that students should avoid taking non-credit developmental courses so they can get on with the regular curriculum are indicators that developmental education is not an institutional priority or, even more telling, an institutional responsibility.

More than thirty years ago, Edmund Gleazer’s response to the perennial complaint about whether some entering students are college material blames neither faculty failings nor student shortcomings for the challenges higher education faces:

We are not building a college with the student. The question we ought to ask is whether the college is . . . student material. It is the student we are building, and it is the function of the college to facilitate that process. We have him as he is rather than as we wish he were . . . Can we come up with the professional attitudes . . . (to tap) pools of human talent not yet touched? (1970)

Gleazer emphasizes the responsibility of *an entire campus* to work with the mix of abilities people bring to the academy, no one kind of learning superior to another.

Gleazer’s insights influenced a reform movement led by Terry O’Banion and the League for Innovation in the Community College in the mid-1990s to transform educational institutions into genuine learning organizations where all practices, from the classroom to the boardroom, would be vetted through a simple but powerful heuristic: how does this practice or policy or pedagogical intervention support or enhance student learning? (O’Banion 1997).

Earlier reform movements based on learner- and learning-centered ideas and practices have also defined fields within higher education. For instance, the Student Development Movement in the 1970s called on entire institutions and not only counselors and student affairs professionals to become more student centered. Twenty years earlier, Carl Rogers, a prominent leader in the Humanist Education Movement, drew insights from his studies of adults in therapy and applied them to education. His client-centered theory of personality and behavior became the foundation for his conceptualization of student-centered learning and

the conviction that we cannot “teach” other people directly but can only “facilitate” their learning (1951; 1969). Rogers also introduced the concept of significant learning which involves the whole person: “significant learning . . . is more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning that makes a difference—in the individual’s behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes, and in his personality . . . (it) interpenetrates . . . his existence” (1969, 280). These ideas shaped core practices not only within adult education (Kidd 1973; Knowles 1970; Knowles, et al. 1998), but also within developmental education through practitioners’ study of adult learning theory and practice (Casazza and Silverman 1996). This intellectual legacy explains why faculty educated in these fields as well as student affairs professionals often contribute a seasoned expertise to learner- and learning-centered campus initiatives, including learning community work.

But as Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995) point out, most institutions in higher education are not organized to make student learning a central preoccupation even if some claim this is their mission and access far outstrips attainment. In their widely read and cited *Change* article, “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” they note that most of us work in places where the institution is geared up to provide instruction, offer classes, and fill classes—patterns they associate with an “instructional paradigm.” In times of tight budgets, struggling students are perceived as a liability; they drop out and drag publicly scrutinized retention rates down. Why admit them in the first place?

John Tagg deepens our understanding of how institutions’ organizational structures and cultures undermine the high hopes and great expectations that students have for themselves and that we have for them and for higher education. In *The Learning Paradigm College* (2003), he points out that the functional frameworks of college life and college work, the everyday ways of doing and thinking about things, become so familiar we hardly notice them anymore, even when they impose limits on our collective ability to pay attention to student learning. He writes:

What the Learning Paradigm proposes is simply to take hold of the horse and lead it to its proper position in the front of the cart, to put purposes before processes . . . Where the Instruction Paradigm highlights formal processes, the Learning Paradigm emphasizes results or outcomes. Where the Instruction Paradigm creates atomistic structures, the Learning Paradigm creates holistic ones. Where the Instruction Paradigm attends to classes, the Learning Paradigm attends to students. In the Learning Paradigm the mission of colleges and universities is to produce student learning. This end is primary; the means are secondary and are to be judged by how well they achieve the end. At the core of the Learning Paradigm is a model of the teaching-learning process that focuses on the learner learning. (31)

Tagg offers many examples of learning-centered practices, a number drawn from learning community practice (258–279). He captures the good sense and energy of learning communities by reminding us that on every campus we find

vibrant, purposeful communities of practice with intentional learning goals and a mix of learners from novices to experts. The first examples he names we think of as extracurricular activities: math clubs, jazz ensembles, debating societies, newspapers, literary journals, theater groups, and so on. Learning communities also form *within the curriculum* so learning will be as engaging, purposeful, and powerful as learning outside school, and will link learning “in here” to learning “out there.”

For J. and his peers, an off-campus ropes course—with its demanding mix of physical and emotional challenges—becomes a metaphor for academic success because to “do ropes” you must risk trusting yourself and others. A student who gives an impromptu lecture under a viaduct on the meaning of graffiti enralls everyone during an inner-city field trip designed to introduce TLC.XL summer bridge students to the work of cultural anthropologists. This event becomes a story faculty tell their colleagues to explain why they find teaching developmental students transforming and worthy academic work. The field trip to the UCLA campus that leads J. to recast his lifetime possibilities surfaces in other students’ stories. The field trip is “proof” the college believes each student *will* graduate. Why else would they be taken there?

What appears to be a naïve interpretation of an institution’s role in student success is backed by educational research<sup>5</sup>; it is a view shared by educational reformers who appreciate that learning environments which offer the greatest support and most challenge for developmental students are part of a broader campus-wide commitment to improving *all* students’ learning. In this sense, *The Pedagogy of Possibilities* is about more than isolated classroom practice, however superb an instructor’s scholarly teaching, learning and assessment may be. We are interested in sites within the academy where a team of educators, working together and supported by administrative and institutional practices, are able to develop a holistic, integrative approach to student learning and student development that persists during a person’s entire undergraduate experience.

In this monograph, we are especially interested in those sites where a learning communities’ approach would most benefit students unprepared and new to college work and college life. Two places seem especially critical: within development education programs where students’ placement assessments indicate their skills in reading, writing, and mathematics do not meet college entry expectations; and at transition points from developmental education into college-level courses, where students can become frustrated, flounder, and, if disconnected from supportive student subcultures, often leave college (Tinto 1987).

This monograph is divided into three sections. The first section lays the groundwork for collaboration by introducing higher education faculty and staff new or unfamiliar with developmental education and/or those unfamiliar with learning community work to one another’s practice. We hope to dispel two notions: that developmental education is like a version of high school classes and any insights about teaching and learning will have little application to college-level work; and that learning communities, with their emphasis on substantive learning, are too intellectually demanding for students who need to work on basic skills.

The beginning chapter in the first section discusses what it takes to be “prepared” for college. We examine research on students’ fear of failure, the approach to learning they subsequently adopt, and the conceptions of learning and intelligence that undermine effective learning. The second chapter introduces the work of developmental educators, a developmental perspective on learning, and research-based best practices in developmental education. The third chapter continues this discussion by examining learning communities, an acknowledged “best practice” and means for creating challenging and supporting learning environments for developmental students. We review the essentials of learning community practice from the original rationale to various curricular restructuring models, the architecture within which connected, meaningful student learning flourishes. A concluding call for action invites developmental educators and learning community practitioners to work together to not only support access to higher education, even if students arrive underprepared for college, but also to ensure that *all* students on our campuses are successful in their studies.

The monograph’s second section offers more in-depth accounts of learning communities. These cases illustrate approaches to curriculum, and sometimes assignments, designed for developmental students in learning communities—either within developmental education or between developmental education and college-level studies. A third section on additional resources follows.

### **Endnotes**

1. For more information on Pasadena City College’s Teaching and Learning Communities Program go to <http://www.pasadena.edu/externalrelations/TLC>.
2. The system of public schools referred to did not include black children in the South.
3. See <http://nces.ed.gov/> and Education Commission of the States 2002.
4. This expression is one used by De Anza College. See Stoll, 1999.
5. The National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment’s Out-of-Class Experiences Project reports that for first-generation college students “validation” is critical: “Faculty and staff validate a student when they tell the student that college is the right place for him or her, that others with similar backgrounds and abilities have attended college, and that this student, too, can succeed at the institution.” See Ratcliff and Associates, 1995.