

Developmental education critical for underprepared students

BY PETER ADAMS
Guest Columnist

A few years ago, I was teaching a traditional "developmental" writing class of 20 students at Community College of Baltimore County; the goal for such classes is to help underprepared students catch up to their peers through research-supported education.

Two students in my class were suffering from PTSD, one had epileptic seizures several times during the semester, one had a brother killed just a month into the semester, and 16 worked at least 30 hours a week. Four of my students had graduated from high school without ever having read a complete book or written an essay. One of my students was living in his car. Three of my students had trouble applying for financial aid because their parents wouldn't provide the tax return required to apply: Their parents didn't want them to go to college; they thought their kids should go to work to support the family.

For these students, my class was the only hope they had of escaping poverty, of achieving a middle-class life. If they didn't pass my class, they couldn't take English 101, and if they didn't pass English 101, they couldn't graduate from college. It was, or at least should have been, a life changer. I felt a tremendous responsibility to do all I could for them, but too often my efforts were not enough. In a typical semester, half my students would have dropped out by Thanksgiving. Two-thirds would never pass English 101.

A study by the Community College Research Center in 2009 found similar results in an analysis of attendance in colleges enrolled in Achieving

Of these students, 79% enrolled in a developmental math course, and 67% enrolled in a developmental reading course. Only 20% of the math students and 37% of the reading students passed the credit-level course for which they were being "developed."

Discovering that the low success rates we were experiencing at my school were typical of the results nationally was little comfort. While my efforts affected just 20 students, nationally these low success rates mean hundreds of thousands of students, disproportionately those from low-income backgrounds, are unsuccessful in college, which often means not achieving any college degree and accumulating heavy student debt.

Our lack of success with developmental education is disastrous for the students involved and also extremely damaging to the well-being of our society. Instead of helping to close the income and wealth gaps in our society, higher education is widening them.

Unfortunately, developmental education is not one of the highest priorities in higher education. Most universities no longer offer it, directing students who need it to community colleges. Graduate programs in English seldom include any courses in how to teach developmental writing. Several of the major accrediting agencies have ruled that the only credential required to teach development courses is a bachelor's degree. And, in many English departments at community colleges, full-time faculty only teach the higher-level courses. As a result, the most at-risk students are being taught by the most marginalized faculty at the most underfunded institutions.

Higher education needs

developmental education one of its highest priorities. To do this, here is a list of places we could start:

- Many schools and even entire states have adopted, in some cases mandated, the co-requisite model. While they recognize it can double the success rate of students, few resources have been provided to help faculty make the transition to this significantly different model.

- Many schools and some states have also integrated their developmental reading and writing courses. This means faculty are being asked to teach in disciplines they have no preparation in. Support for faculty development is badly needed.

- Class size in these critical classes must be reduced from the 20 to 30 students per class that are all too common. In the co-requisite model, we recommend no greater than 12.

- Universities must offer courses to prepare their graduate students to teach these developmental education courses.

- The minimum credential to teach developmental courses should be a master's degree — the same as the minimum credential to teach college-level courses like first-year composition or algebra.

- The practice of having the most experienced faculty teach upper-level courses and staffing their developmental courses with part-time faculty needs to end. We should be assigning our strongest faculty to teach developmental courses.

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