A Guide to

Transforming Basic Skills Education

in Community Colleges,
Inside and Outside
the Classroom

Introduction

A Statewide Investment in Improving Basic Skills Education

In 2006, the state of California began investing approximately $30 million per year in improving community colleges' ability to teach developmental education—reading, writing, math and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that prepare students to succeed in college-level coursework and achieve their educational goals. Research indicates that almost 60% of community college students nationwide enroll in at least one developmental education course,[1] but many struggle to succeed in the college-level coursework necessary to earn credentials and transfer to four-year institutions; in California, only 25% of basic skills reading students *ever* enroll in transfer-level English classes and a mere 10% make it to transfer-level math courses.[2]

In response to this sizable problem, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office commissioned a review of relevant research and disseminated a guide that identified effective practices and assisted colleges in developing action plans, *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges*. Colleges convened Basic Skills Committees, participated in professional development opportunities and used Basic Skills Initiative funds to support local improvements.

Three years into this investment, researchers from the University of California at Berkeley and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) set out to understand the impact of efforts to reform California's developmental education programs. Through 169 visits to basic skills classrooms and 323 interviews with practitioners at 20 colleges between 2009-2011, several important findings emerged:

> This guide summarizes concepts found in *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms* (Routledge, 2013) by W. Norton Grubb with Robert Gabriner. Throughout this text, you will find prompts for a deeper exploration of each topic in the book.

- California community colleges have enacted many positive reforms, but on the whole these initiatives remain isolated and limited in scope, unable to significantly impact basic skills students' success on a large scale.

- True transformation of basic skills student outcomes requires comprehensive reform, both inside and outside the classroom.

- Improvements in four key areas of developmental education programs offer the greatest opportunity for meaningful impact on student achievement: classroom pedagogy, use of student services, program structure and reform leadership.

The experimentation fostered by the Basic Skills Initiative has helped to identify and develop approaches that *are* making a difference. However, creating scalable and sustainable change in developmental education will require more than expanding projects that address only one or two pieces of students' developmental education experience. This means examining the interrelationship of instructional methods, student supports, assessment and placement processes and curriculum structures and alignment. Our research shows that if colleges hope to transform outcomes for significant numbers of basic skills students, they must be willing to fundamentally transform their approach to basic skills education. It is only through a deep exploration of how developmental education works at their institutions, top to bottom, that colleges can seize the opportunity to shepherd *all* students along the pathway to educational success.

In This Guide

To help colleges understand where to start this kind of comprehensive reform, this guide identifies and explores four key changes that can be made to basic skills programs in order to significantly improve student outcomes. The extensive research that we conducted in California community colleges revealed that the following factors demonstrated the greatest potential to boost outcomes for substantial numbers of developmental education students:

1. Reforming pedagogy

2. Maximizing the effectiveness of student services

3. Creating structural coherence

4. Building leadership at all levels

This guide examines each of these components of basic skills programs, highlighting key research findings and providing discussion questions that can jump-start important conversations among community college administrators, faculty and staff. At the conclusion of the guide, community college practitioners at all levels will gain a new understanding of how students experience developmental education and how colleges can transform that experience to catalyze student success.

Reforming Pedagogy in Basic Skills Classrooms

Why Pedagogy Can't Continue to be a Forbidden Subject

When seeking to better foster the success of basic skills students, it seems natural to look at what happens in the classroom, the most significant part of any educational experience. However, an in-depth look into developmental education's pedagogy is somewhat rare. More commonly, efforts to boost the success of basic skills students focus on building up support systems *outside* of the classroom. While enhancing student support can help improve their educational outcomes, students' experience *in the classroom* is so critical to their success, or lack thereof, that it cannot go unexamined.

Exploring the pedagogy used in developmental education courses can be an uncomfortable pursuit. The education community places a high value on academic freedom, trusting instructors to approach the material in the manner they feel is most appropriate. For many, administrative intrusion into the teaching sphere has highly negative connotations, like pressure in K-12 classrooms to "teach to the test."

Opening the door to developmental education classrooms to examine the teaching process is essential to any meaningful improvement in basic skills students' outcomes. Higher education typically places the greatest emphasis on instructors' mastery of the content in their discipline, with little attention paid to their training as teachers. At most colleges, there is an implicit expectation that students understand how to learn, and the role of professors is to be experts in their disciplines.

In developmental education, however, students are still trying to master the fundamentals of reading, writing and math—content that many have already been exposed to but remains beyond their grasp. As such, an examination of *how basic skills instructors teach* is essential. If the classroom experience does not maximize student learning, then all of the support programs a college can offer will only be able to make limited progress in improving student success.

"Remedial Pedagogy"

One of the most prevalent themes from our visits to developmental education classrooms was the commitment that instructors had to their students. Across colleges, basic skills instructors exhibited a love of teaching and a genuine respect for students.

Alongside this genuine dedication to the students, however, we found that the majority of basic skills instructors were using "remedial pedagogy," a teaching approach that lacks what research has identified as the key components of effective learning—active student participation in learning, development of critical thinking skills and connections to the world outside the classroom.[3] Furthermore, this approach usually fails to spark student interest, leaving them bored and disengaged. With many instructors having little formal training as teachers, it is understandable that these highly committed educators might not be equipped with an in-depth knowledge of pedagogical options.

We observed the use of remedial pedagogy in developmental education courses across all subject areas. Below are two examples of what the use of this teaching approach looked like in the classroom.

In a math class that we visited, the instructor put two algebraic expressions on the board for students to factor, without offering any instructions. As students worked on their own, some asked questions that indicated they had no idea what to do; the instructor appeared to be unaware that some students were not grasping the material. At one point, he explained the purpose of the exercise by stating, "We need this skill in order to factor polynomials;" however, he did not go on to clarify why factoring polynomials was important in the context of the class or future study. The instructor then moved on to an example from the textbook, although most of the students didn't have the textbook with them. At the conclusion of his demonstration, he asked, "Everybody understand how it's working?" Without waiting for any responses, he directed the students, "Try it by yourself."
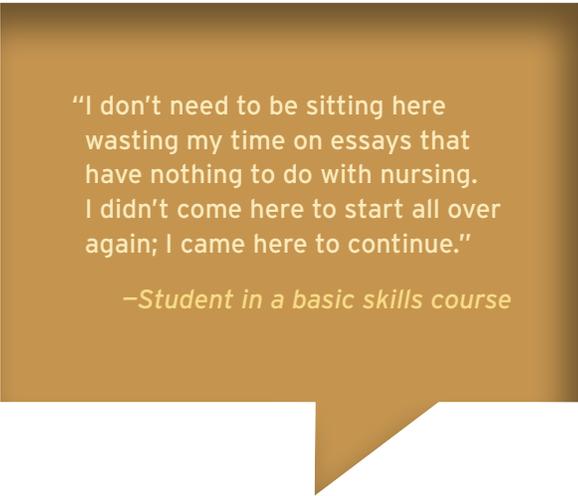
A basic skills writing class we visited offers another view of remedial pedagogy at work. In this class, the instructor asked students to work in groups, though he failed to share with them the purpose of these groups. He then handed out a rubric to the confused students that they were supposed to use to assess one another's essays. The rubric included mostly yes/no questions, and students weren't sure whether they were supposed to engage in discussion or simply answer the questions. As a result, students interacted with their group-mates only minimally. The instructor circulated among the groups, some of whom had wandered to other topics, and asked vague questions—"How are you doing?" and "Do you have any questions?"—that elicited equally vague responses.

What's So Wrong with Remedial Pedagogy?

Remedial pedagogy emphasizes drills and practice on sub-skills that eventually build to proficiency in an area necessary for college-level coursework. In English courses, for example, students develop mastery first of vocabulary, then sentences, then paragraphs and then essays. In many ways this approach makes intuitive sense—how can students be expected to put together a five-paragraph essay if they are still struggling with sentences?

Unfortunately, remedial pedagogy too often leaves students without the advanced conceptual skills they need to succeed in more advanced courses—courses that many students are already taking simultaneous to their developmental education classes. When students learn sub-skills without any context, and without an understanding of why these sub-skills matter, they often leave their developmental courses equipped only with an arsenal of sub-skills rather than the big-picture comprehension that they really need.

"I don't need to be sitting here wasting my time on essays that have nothing to do with nursing. I didn't come here to start all over again; I came here to continue."

—Student in a basic skills course

Another key component of remedial pedagogy is its failure to link foundational reading, writing and math skills to life outside the classroom, either the "real world" or future discipline-specific study. Instead, students learn these skills in a vacuum and often struggle to connect what they've learned in developmental education to subsequent advanced material. As such, even when students are able to complete the basic skills education sequence, achieving a credential or transferring to a four-year institution remains an enormous challenge.

Finally, one of the most important underlying components of remedial pedagogy across all subject areas is the role that instructors play as the source of all knowledge in the classroom. Most classrooms we observed were teacher-centered, with very little interaction among the students or between students and instructors. This approach often leads to students missing out on the opportunity to meaningfully participate in their own learning. Instead, students are left to passively absorb content.

If Not Remedial Pedagogy, Then What?

There are a number of other pedagogical methods that basic skills instructors can use instead of remedial pedagogy. Research indicates that the constructivist approach is highly effective in fostering both student engagement and meaningful learning.[4,5] Using this approach, instructors focus on teaching students to continuously connect what they've learned previously to new information or ideas. In this way, the development of basic skills is placed in context and prepares students to take foundational content and effectively apply it to other subjects in advanced courses. In addition, under the constructivist approach the instructor takes on a coaching or mentoring role, enabling students to play a greater role in how they understand the material.

While remedial pedagogy dominated most of the developmental education classrooms we observed, we also saw instructors who used innovative approaches to teaching basic skills. For example, one adjunct faculty member had her students read an entire novel and used that novel to teach grammar, vocabulary and other language basics. Instead of building small skills in order to eventually achieve broader mastery, a "part-to-whole" method, this instructor started with the "whole" and then teased out the "parts".

In an ESL class we observed, the instructor provided numerous opportunities for students to learn from one another. For example, students developed homework questions for their classmates, and the instructor provided feedback on whether questions were too easy or too hard for the level of the class at that time. In another exercise, students used prompts from the instructor to work in pairs on a conversation, addressing concepts such as verb tense and pronunciation. Students also were exposed to their non-ESL peers, working with students in a neighboring global studies course on a set of discussion questions about international developments.
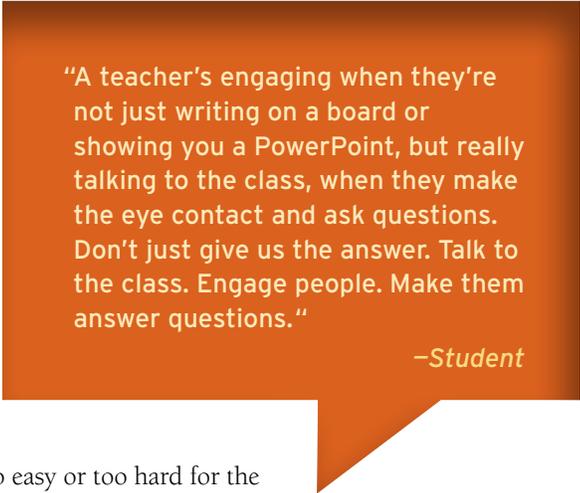
> "A teacher's engaging when they're not just writing on a board or showing you a PowerPoint, but really talking to the class, when they make the eye contact and ask questions. Don't just give us the answer. Talk to the class. Engage people. Make them answer questions."
>
> —*Student*

The Critical Role of Professional Development in Improving Classroom Pedagogy

Colleges looking to reform teaching methods in basic skills classrooms will likely find that instructors themselves need opportunities to learn about the practice of teaching. To equip faculty to provide the most effective learning experience, professional development is essential.

Professional development is a term that can be used to cover a wide range of activities, from an hour-long workshop to an extended learning experience. Research indicates that some of the most effective professional development engages instructors over long periods of time and provides opportunities for them to work with their colleagues in developing and practicing new skills over time.[6]

We observed a wide range of approaches to professional development over the course of our study. One college brought in "achievement coaches" to introduce the basic skills faculty to best practices in instruction as well as provide individual mentorship and support as faculty pursued improvements in their teaching methods. At another college, adjunct faculty were provided 12 hours of professional development throughout the year, working through a series of topics including approaches to instruction. This proved to be a meaningful resource for adjunct faculty, individuals who often teach a large proportion of basic skills courses but are typically poorly integrated into the department.

> "When it is left to individual instructors, they like to learn more in their own disciplines, so they learn new content—as opposed to spending time looking at pedagogy."
>
> *—Faculty member*

We also observed less effective forms of professional development, such as "Flex days" during which the college brought in outside speakers to address a range of topics. Often colleges left it up to faculty themselves to choose what they wanted to learn through professional development. While this flexibility in theory allowed faculty to pursue the specific areas of learning they need most, we found that faculty rarely focused on instructional issues.

Ultimately, without professional development, it will likely be difficult for instructors to gain the new skills and knowledge needed to bring new teaching methods into the classroom. However, it is important to remember that it is the quality of that professional development, rather than its quantity or mere availability, that will result in meaningful changes to classroom pedagogy. While many colleges are understandably reluctant to spend limited resources on "luxuries" like professional development, they are likely to find that an investment in instruction itself can revolutionize outcomes for their developmental education students.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about remedial pedagogy, see Chapter 3 of *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms*, "Instruction in Basic Skills: The Dominance of Remedial Pedagogy."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At your institution or in your department, is pedagogy an acceptable topic in discussions about improving outcomes for developmental education students? If not, why not? What other kinds of discussions *are* happening at your college?

2. What kinds of instructional approaches are being used at your college in basic skills math, reading, writing and ESL courses? If you don't know, how might you find out?

3. Does your institution support professional learning for faculty? If so, are adjuncts included? On what topics does your professional development focus?

4. If you and your colleagues have participated in professional development in the past, has it translated into meaningful changes in your day-to-day work?

5. If you could pursue any kind of professional development that you wanted, what would you like to learn? What might be helpful for your colleagues?

Maximizing the Effectiveness of Student Services

Community colleges offer a wide range of support services to students, including tutoring centers, workshops, "introduction to college" courses, first-year experience programs, supplemental instruction, counseling and early alert programs. Unfortunately, our research showed that many struggling students do not access available resources. Furthermore, support services themselves frequently use remedial techniques, reducing their capacity to boost academic achievement. Finally, the disconnect between instruction and support programs limits the effectiveness of that support, leaving students without the maximum benefit from colleges' support systems.

Why Students Are Not Seeking Help

While community colleges may provide an array of supports to their students, these programs and services can only help students who seek them out. While it may seem obvious that developmental education students who are struggling should take advantage of the support that's available, one college that we interviewed estimated that a mere 25% of its developmental education students made use of student services.

We found that one of the obstacles to students' effective use of student services is their level of awareness of what's available. While most colleges have some method of relaying this information to students, it does not typically coincide with when the students actually need help. For example, intensive orientation programs required of new students often provide a comprehensive inventory of student services; however, when a student needs help two semesters later, that inventory is likely to be long forgotten. Similarly, instructors who list the availability of tutoring services or study skills workshops on the first day of class might easily fail to connect with students who aren't aware that they will need those services several months down the line. Furthermore, our observations found that many instructors did not inform students about student services options at all; as many of these instructors were adjunct faculty, they themselves might have had an incomplete understanding of available services.

While some struggling students may not be fully aware of the supports available to them, many others do understand what the college offers and yet still do not ask for help. In fact, in our observations we found that students who *do* take advantage of the supports available are most often those least in need of help. As one

> "I have friends that did not take [a student success] class and they don't feel connected because they don't really know what's going on. They ask questions like, 'What's happening at the student services center? Do we even have a transfer center? Do we even have a counseling center? Do we even have EOPS or DSPS?'"
>
> *—Student*

> "Some students are too shy or afraid to participate [in support services]; more shy than afraid."
>
> *—Student in developmental education*

basic skills instructor described, "When I used to spend time in [the tutoring center], the only ones I'd see would be my high-level students, the ones that didn't need it. Low-level students don't take advantage of that stuff.... I think we have fantastic student support, if only students would take advantage of it. It's getting them there to do it [that] is the problem."

Why are the students who reach out to support services not the ones who really need them? Our observations and conversations with students suggested an important obstacle that is often overlooked: in order to reach out for support, a student first has to identify him or herself as a failure. For developmental education students who already have had to cope with enrolling in college only to find that they aren't "college-ready", acknowledging that they are struggling to succeed in high school-level courses might be quite difficult. And because most community colleges rely on the students themselves to take the extra step of seeking out support, the end result is that the students who are least successful end up receiving the least amount of assistance.

Remedial Pedagogy in Student Services

While most community colleges distinguish student services from instruction, both structurally and culturally, student learning does not just take place inside the classroom. Tutoring programs, supplemental instruction, student success courses and many other services offered outside the basic skills classroom are a critical part of students' learning experience. Moreover, just as remedial pedagogy permeates basic skills classrooms, we found that it also plays a significant role in student services, limiting the effectiveness of support programs.

Peer tutoring programs, for example, are used at many colleges to help struggling developmental students master course content. In our observations, we found that many tutors used the same remedial pedagogy that was found in the classroom: for example, focusing on getting students to the right answer to a math problem or a grammatically correct sentence rather than exploring the material at hand in a meaningful way that engaged the student in her or his own learning.

As most peer tutors are only a few steps ahead of the students they are helping and typically have had no formal or informal training in instructional techniques, it is easy to understand why their approach to teaching mirrors that of the classroom. Unfortunately, just as remedial pedagogy limits development of advanced conceptual skills in the classroom, it has the same effect in support programs.

The Great Divide: Student Services and Instruction

Finally, the effectiveness of support systems in many community colleges is undermined by an entrenched division between student services and instruction. In most colleges today, student service activities and instruction are undertaken within two distinct administrative structures. For example, a Vice President of Student Services might oversee functions like counseling and academic advising, while a Vice President of Instruction is responsible for academic departments and coursework. Within this divided structure, student services and instructional faculty must compete for resources

> "The Learning Center seemingly wants to set up almost a private-like doctor-patient kind of relationship between the tutor and the student, with the instructor being this odd kind of satellite off to the side, which we [instructors] see as very odd because most of our understanding of tutorial assistance is to assist faculty with their students' responses to assignments."
>
> *—Basic skills instructor*

in the college budget. Moreover, often a culture of rivalry among practitioners in the two areas permeates the institutional culture. In many of the colleges we observed, for example, instructional faculty and student services faculty felt in competition for students' time. Full-time instructors who held office hours were often reluctant to refer students to support programs, not trusting the quality of the assistance they would receive with the course material.

The result of this structural and cultural divide is a missed opportunity to enhance student success. Developmental education students in particular need instructors and support services personnel working together to help them overcome the numerous barriers to academic achievement that they face. Without collaboration between practitioners in these two areas, student services faculty cannot make the most of what happens in the classroom, and instructional faculty cannot effectively leverage support programs to improve students' academic outcomes.

Collaboration between student services and instruction can occur in a variety of ways. One of the most meaningful steps practitioners can take is to mutually acknowledge that most basic skills students are not pursuing assistance on their own. Whether students are limited by their understanding of available supports or by their reluctance to ask for help, colleges can respond by bringing support to the students rather than requiring students to seek it out. Some colleges we observed took a proactive approach, with instructors mandating a certain number of visits to tutoring centers, workshops or other support programs for *all* students—as they explained to the students, "This is what all successful students do." In other colleges, students were required to develop an educational plan early on in their college career, and student services personnel followed up on progress at regular intervals.

Colleges can also seek to eliminate both the literal and cultural divisions between student services and instruction. One college that we researched, for example, undertook a major restructuring so that student services and academic faculty reported to a single vice president. On the ground level, this kind of integration can also be found in certain learning communities, in which teams of faculty from both instruction and student services coordinate a program of study to simultaneously build students' content knowledge and equip them with the skills to thrive as college students. Student success courses also present an opportunity for collaboration between student service and instructional faculty; when delivered using a strong pedagogical foundation, these courses can have a powerful impact. Finally, simply deepening the involvement of instructional faculty in support programs and student services faculty in the classroom can leverage the effectiveness of each facet of the student experience.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To explore the role of student services in more depth, see Chapter 5 of *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms*, "Student Support Services: Their Possibilities and Limits." To learn about one college's innovative approach to bringing together instruction and student services, see Chapter 6, "Integrating Student Services with Instruction: Chaffey College's Long Journey to Success."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What percentage of developmental education students at your institution use support services? Do they tend to be the students who are struggling the most academically or the ones who are succeeding?

2. How do instructors and student services personnel (such as counselors or tutors) communicate with one another? How effective is that communication?

3. What would a more proactive, rather than reactive, approach to students' use of support programs look like at your institution? Who would be in favor of such a change and who would struggle with it? Why?

4. How could instructors and student services faculty and staff collaborate more on behalf of the students? Would increasing cooperation be difficult or easy? If it could be accomplished, how would more meaningful coordination benefit your developmental education students?

Creating Structural Coherence in Developmental Education

In addition to closely examining basic skills students' experiences inside the classroom and with student services, colleges looking to transform development education outcomes must also examine the structure of their basic skills programs. In doing so, it is critical to look at how the program works from *the point of view of the students*.

In theory, a college's developmental education program guides students through a logical progression of learning. Students are assessed upon admission to the college and placed in courses commensurate with their abilities. Every level of reading, writing, math or ESL focuses on certain foundation skills, each one building students' knowledge and preparing them for the next level of work. At the conclusion of the basic skills sequence, students are fully equipped to pursue advanced study and/or career preparation.

While this may be the model in theory, reality can look quite different. In our site visits, we often found that disconnected assessment and placement processes led to students' being directed to courses far above or below their actual competency. We observed a similar disjointedness among the levels of basic skills programs, so that success at one level did not necessarily provide students with the skills necessary to succeed in the next. Moreover, we saw courses whose multiple sections, taught by different instructors, provided a widely varied range of preparation to students who were supposed to be learning the same material.

> "I had no idea that test was important."
>
> "I didn't know it was serious."
>
> "My friends were waiting outside to go to the beach."
>
> *—Counselor, quoting typical student responses to their placement in basic skills courses*

Based on these observations, we have found that if basic skills programs are to provide students an experience that truly prepares them for future success, they need a *coherent structure*—one in which students:

- are placed in courses appropriate to their abilities and academic preparation;

- emerge from different sections of the same course with comparable new skills; and

- are fully prepared by each course for the next course in the sequence and/or college-level courses.

Assessment and Placement Systems: A Deep Disconnect

One of the first things that most new community college students do is take an assessment test. This test is supposed to evaluate students' knowledge and skills in core areas such as English and mathematics, and then direct students to the particular courses at the college that match their

level of academic preparation. Unfortunately, there are a number of issues deeply embedded in the current process at many colleges that confuse a theoretically straightforward process.

The first obstacle at many colleges is the alignment, or lack thereof, between assessment tests and specific community college courses. Most colleges use off-the-shelf assessments, such as ACCUPLACER or the ACT's COMPASS test, that have little to do with the content of actual English and math courses at a particular institution.

In addition, many new students do not fully comprehend the importance of the assessment test. Often they fail to study at all for this test, unaware that its results could mean the difference between immediate entry into a program of study and several years of remedial coursework. Indeed, we found numerous counselors who described the frustration of students who find themselves placed into courses that teach what they already know; for example, students who passed trigonometry in high school and were placed into basic skills math.

Finally, research strongly indicates that standard assessment processes are in and of themselves deeply flawed. First, the standardized tests that are typically used for assessment have been shown to be poor predictors of student performance, even when students take the tests fully prepared; as such, many community college students are placed in courses for which they are under- or over-qualified. In addition, traditional assessment tests only measure academic proficiency. Research suggests, however, that non-cognitive factors may play a bigger role in students' course success than their knowledge base or skill level.[7]

The results of these obstacles are profound. Not only do many students see their goals delayed, but developmental education classes also end up filled with students who have a wide variety of skill levels and knowledge. With some students placed far below their actual skill level, and others genuinely struggling with basic concepts, it can be an enormous challenge for instructors to provide a meaningful learning experience.

Searching for Horizontal Harmony

In addition to the negative effect of poorly aligned assessment and placement processes, a lack of horizontal coordination among faculty across a single course presents even more obstacles for developmental education students.

> "The discrepancy between one teacher and another is so diverse."
> —Developmental English instructor

Many developmental education courses are split into several sections, usually taught by different instructors. While each instructor typically uses the same basic syllabus, too often there are no processes or structures in place to ensure that students in different sections of the same course emerge with the same knowledge and skills. We found it quite common for instructors to work independently in areas such as the details of course content as well as the pedagogical approach. As a result, students who pass the same developmental education course are often unequally prepared for the next course in the sequence or college-level work.

During one of our college visits, for example, a basic skills instructor noted that there was such variety among course sections that the same student might succeed or fail based solely on which faculty member taught the course section. Moreover, she speculated that students might be using popular online faculty rating programs to deliberately seek out the easier sections.

Some colleges have tried to address this issue by creating common course outlines for instructors

to follow, or exit exams for students seeking to progress from one level to the next. While these approaches can be helpful, substantive and ongoing communication and coordination between instructors is needed to ensure that all students in a course have a comparable learning experience.

Vertical Misalignment

Much as horizontal alignment is an essential component of a coherent learning experience, vertical alignment is also needed if developmental education students are to reach higher levels of achievement.

In order for students to successfully progress through the developmental education sequence, instructors must understand both what their students have learned in the previous course as well as what they need to know for the next course. Without this information, basic skills instructors cannot provide a learning experience that effectively launches from the skills students have already mastered and lands at the skills they need for advancement. Unfortunately, our observations revealed that coordination between instructors at different levels of developmental education programs is rare, leaving the students to navigate a confusing series, rather than a coherent sequence, of courses.

> "Students are passing [course number] 105, but they cannot pass 112; students are passing 112 – in some cases, with good grades, As and Bs – but they cannot pass 115."
>
> *—Basic skills English instructor*

One college that we visited had documented the problem of poor vertical alignment. In examining student outcome data, the college found that 65% of students succeeded in passing a particular math class when they had been placed directly into it. However, only 38% of students who enrolled in the class after passing the course prerequisite were similarly successful. At another college, an instructor teaching a course just below college-level described the substantial gap between basic skills and college-level courses: "I complain that the people who have gone through the [basic skills] program are so much less prepared than people who test in at that level. We all agree—there's no way the students can bridge that gap."

Vertical alignment is essential not only within basic skills programs, but also with students' educational experiences before and after developmental education. High schools need to have a thorough understanding of what exactly it means for students to be "college-ready" if they are to have the best chance of preparing students for higher education. While many of the colleges we visited described their intention to improve collaboration with local high schools, almost none of them had a concrete plan or had taken any action steps toward informing the high schools about the high rates of remediation needed for their graduates.

Key Ingredients to Creating a Coherent Basic Skills Program

Developmental education programs that lack coherence can create a whole host of barriers for their students. Fortunately, there are a number of steps that colleges can take to enhance the cohesion of students' educational experience.

To address the inadequacies of the assessment and placement process, for example, some colleges have begun using a holistic assessment process to better understand each student's skill level. This process can include looking at high school transcripts, examining writing samples or using
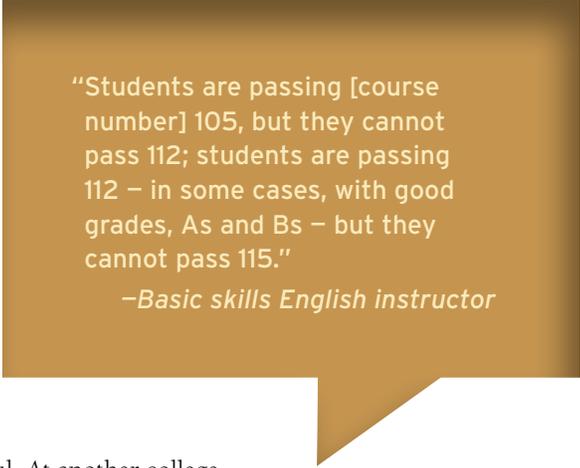
affective measures alongside academic evaluations. Even taking the simple step of bringing practitioners who manage the assessment process together with basic skills instructors can have a meaningful impact on students.

To address issues of horizontal or vertical misalignment, colleges can provide developmental education instructors formal processes that support communication and collaboration, both amongst themselves and with discipline-specific faculty. From setting aside a specific time and place for instructors to meet with each other to requiring coordination of student learning outcomes, there is a wide range of approaches that colleges can take. Ultimately, the delivery of a coherent learning experience to basic skills students can only be achieved when college structures provide faculty and staff time and resources to work together, and when the college's culture actively supports practitioners' joining forces and learning from one another for the benefit of the students.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about coherence in basic skills programs, see Chapter 7 of *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms*, "Assessment and Alignment: The Dynamic Aspects of Developmental Education."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does your institution go about assessing students' academic preparation and placing them in the appropriate courses? Have you found this process to be effective? If not, how could you and your colleagues help ensure that students are assessed accurately and that there is a meaningful connection between that assessment and students' placement into specific courses?

2. How much communication and collaboration occurs among developmental education instructors at your community college? What expectations exist around basic skills instructors working together?

3. To what extent do instructors in your basic skills program communicate with feeder high schools and/or faculty in college-level programs? How does the culture at your college support or impede this kind of communication?

4. What structures or systems might facilitate more frequent and/or more substantive cooperation?

Building Leadership at All Levels

The reforms that are needed to transform outcomes for developmental education students cannot happen without effective leadership. We are used to thinking of leadership as coming from college presidents, vice presidents and other top administrators; however, the leadership that is needed to make meaningful changes both inside and outside the classroom must come from every level of the college. It is only with this kind of comprehensive engagement that comprehensive change can happen.

Start Where You Are

While many practitioners at community colleges might not think of themselves as leaders, acts of leadership take place throughout colleges all the time.

At one college we visited, a philosophy instructor had taken the initiative to create a new course in order to address the deficiencies she observed in students' skill sets. This "essential skills" class focused on what *she* saw students were lacking: critical thinking, collaborative learning and presenting information to others. To better understand where each student was struggling, she used a reading response journal; with this diagnostic tool, she was able to tailor her approach to address specific areas of difficulty.

The creativity and new ideas that come from faculty and staff can play an important role in students' educational experience, as they often leverage in-depth knowledge of the students to respond to on-the-ground observations of obstacles and challenges. However, while we observed numerous innovations like the ones described above at the colleges we visited, those that remained isolated to one classroom or one practitioner were unable to make a meaningful difference for large numbers of basic skills students. For innovations to grow into substantive change, a greater coalition of support is needed.

> "[There were] multiple pathways to English 1A... it felt really inconsistent. So, we got together and had a two-year-long discussion that started with values: what do we want to see happen? What do we call learning?"
>
> —*Basic skills English instructor*

Leadership from the Middle

Some of the most powerful and effective leadership that we observed was leadership that came from mid-level faculty leadership and administrators. At one college, for example, the English department came together when reports from the regional four-year university indicated that their students were not prepared to write effectively in upper-level courses. To address this problem, the department engaged in an extensive series of discussions and activities, including bringing in outside expertise, to design a plan for reform. Critical to this initiative was the department's articulation of its educational philosophy and the consensus that was developed around what every English course at the college should accomplish. The result of these efforts was a newfound focus on integrating reading and writing; helping students develop critical-thinking skills; and ensuring collaboration both among students and between students and instructors.

In another college, we saw faculty across departments collaborating to benefit their developmental students. At this institution, a basic skills English instructor began by combining reading and writing instruction in her classes. Over time, this linkage expanded to include developmental math, career planning, supplemental instruction required of all participating students and an assigned counselor.

These initiatives had a larger impact than the innovations coming from individual faculty members, both affecting more students and creating broader changes to basic skills approaches and structures. However, it also important to note that a number of these types of reforms that we observed were made possible by grant funding. While grants can play an important role in jump-starting change, in order to make those changes sustainable, support from the executive leadership is needed.

Ensuring Lasting Change

Throughout our visits to colleges and interviews with practitioners, we found that most of the energy for improving student success and advancing innovation occurred at middle levels, including faculty and staff without specific authority or title. While these middle leaders enthusiastically embraced the responsibility for improvement, we also saw that some of their initiatives were hampered by a lack of engagement from their supervisors and/or the college's top executives. The reforms that we observed that held the most promise combined leadership from the middle with support from executive administration. The merging of these forces enabled colleges to do the following:

- Change the developmental education experience at the ground level, for example through new instructional approaches

- Enact necessary structural reforms, such as creating alignment across a sequence of courses

- Institutionalize reforms through avenues such as developing new hiring practices and providing ongoing funding for professional learning

Chaffey College in California offers an example of the power of combining leadership from the middle with executive support. In 1999-2000, Chaffey College created a task force to take on the pervasive and daunting problem of developmental education students' struggle to succeed. The group comprised approximately 35 mid-level administrators, faculty and staff from across the college committed to improving outcomes for basic skills students. For an entire school year, the team reviewed developmental education students' academic data, interviewed faculty at other colleges and worked on a plan for making over the college's approach to basic skills instruction.

The resulting Transformation Plan was implemented over a ten-year period. The college streamlined and redesigned the developmental education department; reformed the pedagogical approach used in basic skills courses; created new structures that promoted substantive collaboration between instruction and student services; and prioritized ongoing professional learning for all faculty. To ensure the long-term sustainability of these reforms, Chaffey's top administrators permanently allocated funds in the college budget.

Ultimately, our observations indicate that large-scale, substantive transformations are usually the result of comprehensive engagement in leadership, including:

- faculty and staff who can review evidence, generate ideas and implement reforms on a daily basis;

- mid-level administrators who can create structures that support success and last beyond any one individual's tenure; and

- top-level administrators who can bring effective practices to scale across the institution and ensure their sustainability with allocated resources.

Without all of these components, reform efforts are unlikely to produce real and lasting change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To further investigate issues of leadership in developmental education reform, see Chapter 4 of *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms*, "Innovation in Basic Skills Education: The Landscape and the Locus of Change."

Additional information about Chaffey College's journey can be found in Chapter 6, "Integrating Student Services with Instruction: Chaffey College's Long Journey to Success."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think back to a recent change or reform initiative at your institution. What was the decision-making and implementation process like? Who was involved? Who made the decisions? How did this process implement the success of the initiative?

2. If you could design an inclusive process for making change in developmental education at your college, what would it look like? Who would you include? Why?

3. If your institution currently uses a top-down approach to change, what are steps that you could take to help alter that?

Moving Forward in Transforming Basic Skills Education

The Basic Skills Initiative has been an important investment in addressing a critical problem in community colleges—the overwhelming numbers of students who need support to succeed in college-level coursework. It has enabled colleges to incubate new ideas and facilitated conversations about the types of supports that students need. At the same time, the majority of improvement efforts have remained isolated, reaching only a few students and leaving deeper structural issues largely untouched.

Our extensive study has revealed that picking and choosing small-scale reforms that nibble at the edges of students' developmental education experience does not result in a real transformation of outcomes for these students. Instead, we have found that colleges need to consolidate their efforts to focus on making fundamental changes to their basic skills programs, both inside and outside the classroom. As demonstrated by our site visits and interviews across the California community college system, transformation efforts will be most effective when:

- Changes in basic skills pedagogy lead to students being truly engaged and fully prepared to succeed in college-level courses

- The integration of student services and instruction enables the college to provide powerful support for developmental education students that continually enhances classroom learning

- Renovation of developmental education program structures are designed to create streamlined and cohesive learning pathways

- The change process calls upon administrators, faculty and staff to all be leaders and energetically support the transformation of developmental education in their respective roles

By working together to build a coherent developmental education strategy, community colleges can move from islands of innovation to a sea of change.

Additional Resources

2011 Strengthening Student Success Conference

This website offers numerous PowerPoint presentations that discuss research results and effective practices in developmental education, with a focus on California community colleges.

www.rpgroup.org/events/SSS11

Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in the California Community Colleges

This report and its companion self-assessment guide describe strategies for meeting the needs of basic skills students.

www.rpgroup.org/publications/StudentSuccessBook.htm

Basic Skills Progress Tracker

This online tool tracks the progress of various basic skills student cohorts through the developmental sequence and their first college-level course.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/basic-skills-progress-tracker

The Basic Skills Research Project

A joint project of UC Berkeley and the RP Group, this suite of papers and summary guide offers an analysis of basic skills instruction as observed at 14 California community colleges and suggestions for ways to improve basic skills efforts.

www.rpgroup.org/projects/basic-skills-research-project

BRIC Inquiry Guide-Assessing Basic Skills Outcomes

This inquiry guide and PowerPoint presentation are designed to assist in the development of evaluation tools for basic skills strategies and innovations. Topics addressed include the promotion of inquiry and dialogue, development of a comprehensive research agenda and fostering a results-driven evaluation plan.

www.rpgroup.org/BRIC/InquiryGuide/BasicSkills

Contextualized Teaching and Learning Project

This project includes a primer, video and other resources related to implementing contextualized teaching and learning, including key insights, instructional strategies and student perspectives.

www.rpgroup.org/css/CTL.html

Diagnostic Assessment: Challenges & Opportunities for the California Community Colleges

This brief examines the experiences of three states that have been deeply engaged in developing statewide diagnostic assessments for their community college systems and explores practical implications if California community colleges were to implement a similar approach.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/diagnostic-assessment-challenges-opportunities-california-community-colleges

Economics of Innovation Excel Tool

This Excel tool and explanatory PowerPoint can be used to calculate the return on investment for basic skills staffing and programs.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/economics-innovation-excel-tool

Effective Practices for Promoting the Transition of High School Students to College

This guide explores the successful transition of students from high school into postsecondary education.

www.rpgroup.org/content/high-school-transition

A Golden Opportunity: Strategies to Focus Adult Education on College and Career

Drawing on the experience of seven other states, this report examines four policy levers California could consider employing to more effectively focus its adult education program on helping basic skills students access and complete postsecondary programs connected to labor market opportunities.

www.learningworksca.org/briefs/

Hewlett Leaders in Student Success Program

This website features case studies of programs in California community colleges recognized as Hewlett Leaders in Student Success for demonstrated increases in basic skills outcomes.

www.rpgroup.org/hewlettleadersinstudentsuccess

How to Evaluate a Basic Skills Program

This presentation addresses the process of evaluating a basic skills program, including the important elements of a program evaluation model, different forms of evaluation and measurement and methodologies and measures that can be used with common intervention strategies in basic skills programs.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/how-evaluate-basic-skills-program

Placement Testing, Basic Skills and Student Success

These resources help identify key assessment resources and discuss how and when to use them, in addition to exploring placement testing, basic skills and student success.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/placement-testing-basic-skills-and-student-success

Probability Based Advising for Basic Skills Courses

This research model is designed for advising students on courses they should consider taking concurrently with basic skills courses based on historical success rates for developmental education students.

www.rpgroup.org/resources/probability-based-advising-basic-skills-courses

Promising Practices for Transitioning Students from Adult Education to Postsecondary Education

This guide offers insights into how community colleges can support students transitioning from adult education.

www.rpgroup.org/content/promising-practices-transitioning-students-adult-education-postsecondary-education-0

Recommended Basic Skills Measures

Based on a review and analysis of basic skills student outcomes measures in California and nationwide, this project developed recommendations for a simple set of measures that can be used both system-wide and at the college level.

www.rpgroup.org/content/recommended-basic-skills-measures

Using the California Standards Test to Identify Remediation Needs

This study documents the value of standardized high school test results and course grades in math and English as tools for placement and predicting success in college courses.

www.rpgroup.org/content/2009-rp-statewide-research-award-winner-using-california-standards-test-identify-remediation

Endnotes

1   Bailey, T., & Morest, V. (Eds.) (2008). *Defending the community college equity agenda.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

2   Boroch, D. et. al. (2007). *Basic skills as a foundation for success in the California community colleges.* San Francisco: Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges and the Center for Student Success.

3   ibid

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5   Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning to think like an adult.* In J. Mezirow (Ed.), Learning As Transformation. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

6   Little, J.W. (2006). *Professional development and professional community in the learner-centered school.* Washington, DC: National Academics Press.

7   Hodara, M., Jaggers, S.S, & Karp, M.M. (November 2012). *Improving developmental education assessment and placement: Lessons from community colleges across the country.* (CCRC Working Paper No. 51). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

About the Authors

This guide was written by Elisa Rassen, with support from Kathy Booth, Robert Gabriner, W. Norton Grubb, and Laura Hope, based on the research of W. Norton Grubb, Elizabeth Boner, Kate Frankel, Lynette Parker, David Patterson, Robert Gabriner, Laura Hope, Eva Schiorring, Bruce Smith, Richard Taylor, Ian Walton, and Smokey Wilson. For more in-depth information on this study, please read "Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside the Classroom" by W. Norton Grubb with Robert Gabriner.