NADE Members Respond

Developmental Education Research Agenda: Survey of Field Professionals, Part 2

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This is the final of a two-part article that provides the results of a qualitative study designed to document ideas and beliefs that professionals have regarding an appropriate research agenda on which the field of developmental education should focus in the near future. The participants of the study were members of the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE). The research methods and four of the resulting research topics were described in Part 1. The remaining results (beginning with the fifth topic) and conclusions are described here.

Results

Faculty Credentials and Training

The importance of having the highest quality instructors working with at-risk students cannot be overstated. Participants exhibited an interest in knowing more about the faculty serving in developmental education. They asked:

- What credentials do developmental faculty have?
- What training and development do faculty receive?
- Are faculty being trained to teach redesigned courses?
- What common characteristics exist among the most effective developmental instructors?
- Do classes taught by full-time faculty have greater success than those taught by adjunct faculty?
- What is the relationship between instructor training and student learning outcomes?

Shults (2001) reported that the field relies heavily on adjunct faculty (about 65% of the faculty nationally, are adjunct) to teach developmental courses. Zientek, Ozel, Fong, and Griffin (2013) noted that students taking developmental mathematics courses from adjunct teachers had significantly lower grades. Datray, Saxon, and Martirosyan (2014) noted the challenges of these instructors and made recommendations for supporting the development of adjunct faculty. These faculty are likely to be less engaged in campus activities. This, in turn, may decrease the access that students have to their teachers outside of class meetings. Furthermore, teachers of this rank may receive less compensation and support for their training and professional development.

Generally, it seems that developmental instructors are well credentialed (Boylan, Shaw, Materniak, Clark-Thayer, & Saxon, 2000). Only about 3% of a sample of faculty in Boylan et al.’s (2000) study held a lesser degree credential than a Master’s. However, this may not be sufficient when working with at-risk students. As Boylan (2009) noted, many developmental educators may be content area specialists but lack training in teaching and in knowledge of the challenges faced by disadvantaged and nontraditional students.

Student Characteristics

The protocol for developmental education practice should be understanding students first, and then tailoring instruction and support interventions in order to have the most potential for supporting their accomplishment. Survey respondents obviously understand this and wanted to know:

- What student characteristics would assist in determining which course redesign interventions are best for that student?
- To what extent do reading skills predict success for developmental students?
- How do students perceive developmental education programs on their campuses?
- What do students think about redesigned developmental education course models?
- What factors do students believe have the greatest impact on their success?
- Does student age variance impact the effectiveness of technology-based course instruction?

In her seminal work, Hardin (1988; 1998) described types of students (primarily around life-related circumstances) that participated in developmental education. The point of her work was to more deeply understand students in order to better serve them. Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss (1994) used national data to describe academic and demographic characteristics of developmental students. More recent studies were not found, indicating the need for additional research.

Understanding student characteristics, needs, and preferences is important to providing appropriate learning environments for students from a variety of backgrounds. Zientek, Ozel, Fong, and Griffin (2013) have found that 41% of grade variance is predicted by noncognitive factors such as assertiveness, motivation, and self-regulation. It is therefore essential for teachers to understand and address these variables and their impact on instruction and advising. Student characteristics should also be considered in course and support service placement decisions. It is inappropriate to apply any single type of support service, accelerated or technology-based instruction model, or academic intervention to all students and circumstances and hope to be successful.

Curriculum

The ongoing scrutiny of the success of developmental education courses, and an interest in how secondary education impacts college readiness placed questions associated with the curriculum at the forefront of developmental education professionals’ concerns. Survey respondents were interested in the following:
Will adopting Common Core standards decrease the need for developmental education?  
How can we more effectively align the developmental education curriculum with college-credit classes?  
How does a contextualized curriculum improve retention and completion?  
What type of mathematics do the majority of college students need to be successful?  
What factors influence the need for developmental English and writing?  
How can postsecondary institutions better partner with the K-12 system to reduce the underpreparedness of incoming college students?  

The high school connection to developmental education seems to be a common interest of the print media as well. In a study of the media coverage of developmental education, Boylan, Carringer, Saxton, and Shiles (2009) have found that it was common for media sources to point out inadequacies of public schools and then offer recommendations for reform. Though broad scale mutually beneficial partnerships among colleges and high schools do not seem apparent, dual enrollment programs appear to offer positive results, if only sporadically reported in the literature (An, 2012; Hughes, Rodriguez, Edwards, & Belfield, 2012; Mead, 2009). Boylan and Saxton (2006) have also reported on college and high school articulation. The instances that they have investigated appeared informally structured; however, practices such as curriculum alignment and early college placement testing show promise in the statewide study of high performing developmental programs.

Student Motivation

Finally, respondents expressed an interest in affective factors, specifically motivation, and their impact on student engagement and learning. Practitioners committed to the success of students expressed interest in techniques and strategies that would pique student interest and motivate them to engage more deeply in their developmental studies. Specific questions were:

- What factors most influence student motivation?
- How can intrinsic motivation be developed in students in order to have them engage in challenging tasks associated with learning?
- Can elements of competition and timed-skill assessment be useful for developmental students?

Much classic work on the importance of affective variables in college success has been published (Chickering & Associates, 1981; Seldacek, 2004). Boylan, Saxton, White, and Erwin (1994) discussed the importance of noncognitive variables in retaining minority students in developmental education programs. Zientek, Ozol, Fong, and Griffin (2013) discussed a few studies that identified motivation and self-efficacy as important to student learning of mathematics. However, they acknowledged that the field has a scarcity of studies of these variables and their association with learning in developmental students. It seems that administrators and practitioners need to devise methods of applying the theory and recommendations of the scholars on noncognitive student attributes (cf., Wernersbach, Crowley, Bates, & Rosenthal, 2014). Then their methods can be studied for efficacy and improvement.

Discussion

The field of developmental education is fertile ground for practical research. The large percentages of entering college students who need developmental courses (Smith Jaggars, Hodara, & Stacey, 2013) make the improvement of practice through research a goal for anyone with an interest in the success of students enrolling in open access institutions. Fortunately the field has evolved into a discipline, with three doctoral programs (at Grambling State University, Virginia State University, and West Virginia University).
University, Sam Houston State University, and Texas State University) devoted to research and the promotion of scholarship and leadership. Additionally, several journals and professional associations contribute to the learning and development of developmental education practitioners (Saxon, Sullivan, Boylan, & Forrest, 2005). Philanthropy from major foundations and scrutiny from legislators and administrators has raised awareness of the field, and will in turn impact research and advocacy activity. Commercial and political opportunists have seized the attention of policy makers and philanthropic funding resources in attempts to promote reform, innovation, and solutions. With a cohesive research agenda, scholars and practitioners can arm themselves with data and results to not only counter misinformation in the media but also to guide reform in a meaningful, results-oriented manner and secure funding from private sources to implement change-oriented practices to impact student success in meaningful ways. No matter what practices are applied to developmental education programs, professionals will be called on to develop measures to assess success, investigate applications, and validate results.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are intended to guide research and practice in appropriate directions of concern to the scholars, practitioners, and leaders in the field of developmental education. Ten salient areas of interest have been identified by professionals, for professionals. The preceding agenda may guide the efforts of graduate students and scholars who are seeking the most relevant questions to ponder and research. The end result will be research findings that leaders and practitioners can use to the benefit student learning and success.

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References


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