

The Mistakes We Make and How We Correct Them: What I've Learned As a Consultant

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This manuscript describes five of the most common mistakes made in developmental education programs based on the author's experiences, which include consulting at over 200 community colleges. These mistakes include failing to create a seamless transition, failing to train adjunct instructors, failing to coordinate developmental programs, failing to enforce attendance policies, and failing to ensure that the students who need the most help get it. Each mistake is discussed and followed by a description of what community college developmental programs can do to correct these mistakes.

During my career, I have had the opportunity to visit over 200 community college campuses as an observer or a consultant. Some of the developmental programs I observed were outstanding, most were mediocre, and a few were truly awful. Among those that were mediocre or worse and even among some of the outstanding programs, I noticed that they tended to make the same mistakes. Most of these mistakes represented errors of omission rather than commission. It was not that they did the wrong things so much that they failed to do things right.

The purpose of this article is to describe the most common mistakes that I have observed in developmental programs. Obviously, this is not a research article. The sample of institutions and programs I have visited represents only about seventeen percent of the nation's community colleges. The sample is certainly not random nor is it organized in any scientific manner. Nevertheless, the observations provided here may enable developmental educators to learn from the mistakes of others, or maybe their own, and use this learning to improve the quality of their programs.

Mistake # 1 – We do not ensure a seamless transition.

A seamless transition in developmental and college level courses requires that the exit standards of one level course are con-

sistent with the entry standards for the next level course. In other words, the standards for completing the lowest level developmental mathematics course should be the same as those required for entry into the next level developmental mathematics course.

Similarly, the exit standards for the highest-level developmental writing class should be the same as those required for entry into the first college level writing class. Roueche and Roueche (1999) discuss this and call for community colleges to ensure that a seamless transition exists between all levels of developmental courses as well as between developmental and college level courses.

In situations where the same instructors teach both the developmental course and the college level course in a particular subject, the instructors are likely to provide this consistency of standards. These instructors know what is required to be successful in developmental and college level courses and usually make sure that students who leave their developmental course are ready for their college level course.

Such an arrangement, however, is atypical of most community colleges. Instead of having the same instructor teach both the developmental and the college level course, large numbers of adjuncts are used to teach both levels. A 2001 study by Shults reported that on the average, only 35% of developmental courses at community colleges are taught by full-time faculty. The fact that so many developmental courses are taught by part-time faculty who usually have only limited involvement in their departments or programs makes it difficult to ensure the consistency of standards in developmental courses.

Some colleges address this situation by standardizing the syllabi, textbooks, and assessment instruments used by adjunct faculty. Others address it by requiring a standardized exit test for all students moving from one level of courses to another regardless of whether the instructors are adjunct or full-time. Still others address it by having annual articulation meetings of full and part-time instructors teaching developmental and college level courses to share syllabi, review tests, and identify any inconsistencies in exit and entry standards.

Mistake # 2 – We do not train adjunct faculty teaching developmental courses.

As noted earlier, the vast majority of community college developmental courses are taught by adjunct faculty. Unfortunately, relatively few of the colleges I have observed make a concerted or systematic effort to train adjunct instructors. Those selected as adjunct instructors may be well trained through graduate programs in their discipline but this disciplinary training is unlikely to include any course work on college teaching in general or teaching developmental students in particular. Colleges may provide an orientation program, a handbook, or a standardized syllabus for adjunct instructors but they rarely provide training in adult learning or techniques for teaching developmental students. As a result, many adjunct instructors teaching developmental students do so without the knowledge of how to teach them most effectively.

This may be one of the reasons why recent studies show that completion rates in developmental courses are disappointingly low (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008; Calcagno & Long, 2008). Although there are many exceptions, the majority of these courses are taught by adjunct instructors who have little time available to work with students who are having difficulty, little training in how to work with these students, and little incentive to do either. The good news is that many community colleges are beginning to address this problem. Some are developing on-line training programs for adjunct instructors teaching developmental courses and providing incentives for adjunct instructors to participate in these programs. Some provide well-designed training manuals for adjunct instructors teaching developmental courses. These manuals provide background information on developmental students, tips for teaching them, and articles related to teaching and learning. Other colleges engage in various efforts to integrate adjunct instructors into the mainstream of teaching and learning at the institution. They invite and encourage adjunct instructors to attend all departmental or program meetings and events, they provide mentors for adjunct instructors, they offer incentives for them to participate in campus professional development workshops, and they send adjunct instructors to professional conferences.

Mistake # 3 – We do not coordinate the developmental education effort.

Experts in the field have consistently advised that developmental courses and support services should be housed in a single department or program and integrated into the campus administrative mainstream centralized (Keimig, 1983; McCabe, 2000; Boylan, 2002). However, few community college leaders appear to have taken this advice. According to a report from the American Association of Community Colleges (Shults, 2001), only forty percent of community college developmental programs are centralized.

One of the main benefits of having a centralized approach to developmental education is that it is much easier to coordinate developmental education activities in a centralized program. In fact, Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham (1997) suggest that centralized programs are more effective than decentralized programs primarily because of the coordination and communication that result from centralization. A centralized program, however, does not necessarily ensure that everyone who works with developmental students is “singing from the same sheet of music.”

Those developmental educators who report to the dean of instruction and dean of student services rarely get together to identify program issues and problems that cut across the two divisions and seek collaborative solutions to them. Similarly, instructors of mathematics rarely meet with the instructors of English or reading to identify and resolve common problems. As a result, problems in the design or delivery of developmental education are rarely addressed in a collaborative manner and there is little synergy in the developmental education effort.

Those colleges that have strong coordination of developmental education do so in a variety of ways. Many develop a well-thought-out and widely distributed philosophy statement for the campus-wide developmental education effort. This contributes to a common understanding of the values that should be reflected in establishing policies for and working with developmental students. Having a similarly well-thought-out and widely distributed statement of goals and objectives for the campus-wide developmental education also contributes to coordination. It contributes

to a common understanding of what the developmental program is designed to accomplish. Having a single administrator in charge of the campus-wide developmental education effort also contributes to coordination as does finding areas for collaboration between different campus units serving developmental students.

Mistake # 4 – We do not establish and enforce attendance policies.

One of the major complaints that I hear from developmental instructors is that their students miss too many classes. There are few people who would argue with the notion that attending class is particularly important for developmental students. As Gabriel (2008) points out, “Underprepared students who are already academically behind their classmates are even more at risk if they are not in class from the start” (p. 28). Given this, I am always surprised by the number of developmental programs that do not have stringent and consistently enforced attendance policies for their students.

Many of the faculty members I have interviewed indicate that they adopt the institution’s stated attendance policy for their developmental classes. Frequently, however, this stated attendance policy describes how many courses students are allowed to miss before some sanction is applied. These policies contribute to the impression that absenteeism is acceptable as long as it is not excessive. Other faculty members teaching developmental courses do not have a stated attendance policy. They believe that their students are adults and they should decide for themselves whether or not to attend class.

Programs that address this issue do so with a strict attendance policy for students enrolled in developmental courses. The policy usually states that there is no such thing as an excused absence. All students are expected to attend all classes except in the case of emergencies that are clearly described in the syllabus. For instance, “The fact that your car didn’t start in the morning is no excuse for missing class. Find some other way to get to campus on time.” Students who miss class are still responsible for learning the material covered. They may do this through additional assignments, through individual learning activities in the laboratory,

or through reviewing video clips of class sessions. The message in such programs is that absenteeism is not an option and that students are accountable for all the material covered in class through either attendance or make up work, not just through tests. These sorts of policies may be difficult to implement at first but once they have been in place for a while, students will get used to following them.

Mistake # 5 – We fail to ensure that those who need the most help get it.

Most community colleges assess students upon entry to determine placement and, depending upon local policies, either advise or require students to take the courses into which they place. According to Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006), 58% of entering community college students place into one or more developmental courses. A recent study by Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008), however, reports that only 30 to 40% of those placing into a sequence of developmental education courses actually enroll in the entire sequence. This suggests that whatever advising, placement, and monitoring procedures we use for course placement do not work very well.

Similarly, most colleges offer an array of tutoring and other learning assistance services. But few colleges have any systematic procedures in place for ensuring that those who are most in need of these services actually participate in them. The most common refrain I hear from tutoring coordinators is “The students who participate most regularly are those who currently have a B and want to get an A in a class.” It appears that students enroll in developmental courses and participate in learning assistance services more or less randomly. Few systematic efforts are made to make sure that the students most in need of developmental courses and services actually get them.

Colleges that avoid this problem identify students who are most likely to be at risk at the outset. They look at the historical profile of students who drop out of the institution during the first semester and target students who fit that profile for early and continuous intervention. Such interventions may include mandatory advising and placement, monitoring student behavior, and ongo-

ing academic advising during the first semester. Often a success plan is developed that includes participation in both courses and support services and students meet regularly with counselors or advisers to ensure that the plan is followed. Implementing some of these options will, no doubt, require retraining of academic advising personnel as well as developing and implementing programs to monitor what students are actually doing. However, the effort involved is likely to be rewarded by increased retention of some of the students most at risk.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein once said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (Tangredi, 2005, ¶ 1). One of my criticisms of those who manage developmental education programs is that they continue to make one or more of the mistakes described here and then wonder why their students are performing poorly.

There is nothing wrong with making mistakes as long as we learn from them and do not repeat them. As developmental education faces increasing criticism from policy makers and the media it is more important than ever for us to avoid repeating our mistakes. This is a necessary step in justifying the rather substantial amounts of public funding devoted to developmental education during a time when resources are scarce and policy makers will be forced to make difficult choices.

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