

# Persistence of At-Risk Students in a Developmental Reading Course

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*Developmental programs exist throughout postsecondary education institutions. The CHANCE program at Northern Illinois University targets the needs of inner city students to support them in becoming successful college students. This study sought to understand the reasons that CHANCE students who had failed a required reading course returned to the university and succeeded in passing the course the second time. The study revealed three major themes in the students' decisions to return and continue their education: personal motivation, role of the mentor, and the role of the instructor.*

## RELATED LITERATURE

The importance of the first year of college has been the focus of much research in recent years. Postsecondary administrators have recognized that the transition into the first year of college affects the persistence of students continuing to graduation. Students choose within the first few weeks whether they will pursue higher education in a serious manner (Gardner, 2001). Once the anticipation of going to college and the expectation of college life fade, many first year college students begin to feel overwhelmed and disappointed with the challenges of college (Skahill, 2002). In fact, the student's perception of college plays a big role for developmental students (Dominick, Stevens, & Smith, in press). Students who fall into the category of feeling overwhelmed or not ready for college tend to experience more pressure and stress in school. These factors are dangerous culprits in the quest for increasing retention.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (1997) defines remediation as "coursework that is designed to correct skill deficiencies in writing, reading, and mathematics that are essential for college study" (p. 1).

During the past decade, public institutions of higher education have received criticism and concern about offering remedial coursework (Arendale, 2001). Critics express educational and financial concerns over remediation. Despite concern, the necessity of remediation is present. It is estimated, according to a national study done by Roueche, Baker, and Roueche (as cited in Fielstein & Bush, 1998) that 30 percent to 40 percent of the entering freshman are “deficient in college-level reading, and writing with math deficiencies even greater” (p. 41).

Progressively, professionals in higher education are steering from a deficit model of remedial education and moving towards a more comprehensive model of developmental education to assist all students in reaching their academic potential (McCabe, 2001). Arendale (2001) considers it vital that all of developmental education shifts from a remedial/developmental model into one that encompasses more of a learning assistance academic model to benefit the learner.

The first year is particularly critical for at-risk students who are less likely to persist when presented with obstacles (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Research shows that developmental programs that integrate placement testing, coursework, and counseling, are the most beneficial in retaining students and preparing them for academic coursework (McMillan, Parke, & Lanning, 1997). “For many of them [the developmental students] developmental education represents a launch pad not only to success in college but to a turnaround in their lives” (Boylan, 2003, p. 9). With the potential importance and power of developmental education for the student, it is necessary that insight into student’s perceptions occurs to understand persistence issues.

### **CHANCE PROGRAM**

To help at-risk students, Northern Illinois University (NIU), developed the CHANCE (Counseling Help and Assistance Necessary for a College Education) program for students who do not meet one or more of the admission criteria of NIU. After identification and screening of eligible students, the CHANCE program provides ongoing retention-based counseling services such as individual academic counseling, tutoring, financial aid counseling, special work-

shops, courses to enhance academic skills, and other services designed to enhance academic success.

The CHANCE program has a long and impressive history with over 3,000 students admitted through the CHANCE program having graduated from NIU (CHANCE Program Alumni, 2006). Placement testing is a requirement for admission into the program and is essential to determine if students are in need of any remedial coursework. NIU currently offers developmental courses in reading, English, communications, study skills and mathematics. While the developmental courses that some CHANCE students are required to take during their first year at NIU are designed to provide them with skills to be successful college students, some students do not pass these courses. When this happens, the students typically do not return to the university. The purpose of this study was to understand why students returned to NIU and retook the College Reading course after not passing it the first time. It was our desire to hear the experience directly from the student in order to understand what he/she gained from the CHANCE program, and specifically the reading course offered through the Literacy Education Department.

### **PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influence students who elect to repeat a required developmental reading course after failing to pass it the first time.

The study was guided by two questions:

1. What impacts a student's choice to register for this course a second time, at his or her own expense, rather than withdraw from the University?
2. What impacts the student's success when taking the course the second time?

Clearly, the views of the students hold significant importance in understanding the factors contributing to the retention of at-risk students.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Using a phenomenological approach, this study was done in a manner to best illustrate the experiences from the point of view of the participants. Phenomenology seeks to understand the subjective

experience of those involved in a situation (Merriam, 2002). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were conducted with seven students who succeeded in passing LTRE 100 (College Reading) in the spring after having failed it the first time they took it in the fall. Sixty-five students failed the course during the fall semester and 43 of those students repeated the course in the spring semester. Twenty of those students returned to the university the following fall, and 7 of the 20 returning students participated in the study. In an effort to understand fully the experiences of the participants, the primary researcher conducted person-to-person interviews with nominal interference and structure (Merriam, 2002). Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and then analyzed and coded for themes by both the primary and secondary researchers.

## FINDINGS

An analysis of the interviews revealed three recurring themes in the students' decisions to return and continue at the university: 1) the students own personal motivation to succeed in higher education, 2) the role of the mentor assigned to them through the CHANCE program, and 3) the influential role of their instructors in their success or failure in the course during both sections.

### *Intrinsic Motivation*

Of the seven participants, six commented on their need to be in college. The students spoke of their own personal motivation to succeed in higher education. One participant stated, "If I don't stay in school, I don't have nothing [sic]. ...I'd do everything I could to get a second chance." Another participant noted, "I never thought about dropping out. I have to do this. I can't go home."

One young woman spoke of the need to stay in school for her infant son. "I need to graduate... I need to do this for him." Another student spoke of his need to continue at the university:

I never really thought about dropping out cause I just had to be here.... If I'm going to be successful, I have to be here. This is the only way that I can become something.... I can't go home.... I'm doing this for my mom. She is my rock.... There is nothing for me at home. We have it good here.

### *Role of CHANCE Counselor*

Most of the participants acknowledged the influence of their CHANCE counselor in their decision to repeat the course. Five of the students identified a mentoring relationship that had evolved with their counselor that positively impacted their decision to repeat the course. Student comments in this area included, "My counselor told me this should not stop me from moving on... talking with him made everything alright." "After my son was born she helped me a lot.... She was the one that got me here. I don't know what I would have done if she didn't help get me here. She told me what I had to do and when I came here she gave me a lot of support."

Participants also noted that they liked the atmosphere at the university and felt that CHANCE program staff really cared about them and their success. One student commented on the services of the CHANCE program: "Northern [Illinois University] does a lot to help CHANCE students. Like they have free tutoring... I take advantage of that. It helps me stay here."

### *Role of the Instructor*

A caring instructor appeared to significantly influence the students the second time they took the course. While the participants had a variety of instructors the first semester they enrolled in the class, they were all in one of two sections taught by the same instructor when they repeated the course. Each of the participants acknowledged receiving support and guidance from their second instructor that was not received the first time they enrolled in the course. For example, "And the teacher that I had—awesome.... She's a really nice teacher. She really made me want to do the work." Furthermore, the students noted that the second instructor chose literature that they felt a closer relationship with than they had the first time they took the class. For example, several participants mentioned the personal connection they felt to Malcolm X when reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (Haley, 1964). Students could relate to the poverty and adversity he experienced as a child and admired the way he overcame his humble beginnings.

Each student indicated that their first instructor had a negative

impact on their success in the course. One participant stated, “The teacher [first semester] wasn’t like real clear [sic]...he didn’t really explain things. We were like on our own.” Another commented, “And my [first] teacher...didn’t really explain the work clearly.” Another student stated, “My first instructor told me that I just had to get to answers. Those were her exact words. ... I needed help getting the answers or I wouldn’t have gone to her for help.”

One participant compared the first instructor to the second. Describing the first instructor, he stated, “...and I really didn’t get the feeling that it [the course] mattered. It didn’t seem to matter to my teacher.” Describing the second instructor, he added, “The teacher made it easier... the teacher that I had—awesome.... That was another reason why I did better the second time.” Upon further probing, the participant was asked what he meant by “easier.” He went on to explain how the instructor cared that the students learned the material, indicating that she was patient and explained things clearly. When another participant stated that the second class was “easier,” the researcher again sought clarification. The reply was, “We really got into things in class. The teacher helped us understand. It was real interesting.”

While one could argue that the students were more prepared to take this course the second time they took it, the participants did not emphasize this in the interviews. Although two of the students mentioned that they had a better idea of what to expect in terms of the amount of required reading the second time they took the course, they both indicated that they found their second instructor to be the inspiration and support that got them through the course and made it meaningful for them.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Research has identified the importance of motivation in the classroom by engaging the learners and allowing them to express their thoughts (Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995). According to Fielstein and Bush (1998), developmental students that are motivated to succeed scholastically can prevail over their deficits. Various aspects of motivation positively influenced the developmental students within this study. Motivation within the student, motivation by

the CHANCE counselors, and motivation by the course instructor dominate the transcripts and highlight its importance.

Astin (1993) holds that association with academics, peers, and faculty enhances students' learning, satisfaction, and retention. Farquhar (2000) maintains that it is imperative for higher education staff to provide social support because students' original family and friends support is often absent. The frequency in which participants of this study mentioned their instructors and CHANCE counselor supports previous research in this area. It was obvious that the students found the CHANCE program, as well as their second reading instructor to be instrumental in their success at the university.

Reynolds and Werner (2003) challenge developmental educators to take a learner-centered approach to their instruction, noting that the individual needs of the learners are important due to the diverse population of American colleges. Simpson and Nist (2003) note that in order for instruction to be effective, it must be explicit and direct. Participants of this study responded to the expectations of their instructor when approached as individuals and when provided clear and explicit instructions.

This study also provides support for a student-centered approach to instruction from a faculty member who cares about the success of his/her students. The student-centered educator acknowledges that each student has different needs and abilities (Reynolds & Werner, 2003). "Responding to the individual student may be the most important way to improve your instruction. Appreciating the unique needs and characteristics of your students sets an educational environment that will better enhance learning by each student" (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 151).

The participants in this study did not identify specific strategies that their second instructor used to enhance their learning. Rather, they noted the connection they felt with her and the respect she showed them. They noted that she met them at their level and encouraged them to learn. Brookfield (1990) describes the authentic teacher as someone that students see as a real human being. He suggests that instructors who share aspects of themselves that are not related to their teaching, by using appropriate self-disclosure, show their students that

they are genuine. This fosters a reciprocal relationship that produces trust and the ability to promote trust and self-expression.

### **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study only begins to look at the issue of educational persistence in students enrolled in developmental courses. While useful to begin a discussion about the needs of students enrolled in developmental courses, this study is not generalizable due to its small sample size.

Interviews with faculty and classroom observations could add to our understanding of the students' experiences, as the interaction between the students and their instructors appear to have had at least a perceived impact on the students' success. Additionally, it appears that the CHANCE counselors and the CHANCE program had quite an impact on these students. Further studies might include discussions with these individuals as well.

As colleges and universities continue to seek ways to improve their developmental study programs, as well as the retention and academic success of students in such programs, a variety of stakeholders opinions should be sought to increase our knowledge and develop successful programs. By continuing to seek the opinions of individuals working in these programs, as well as the students, we can create and maintain positive and productive learning environments that meet the needs of the participants.

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