

The Current State of Developmental Education: An Interview with Hunter R. Boylan

By Patti Levine-Brown and S. Wes Anthony

For some people, developmental education has become a for profit industry.



In a higher education career that has spanned over four decades Hunter Boylan has served as a gang control worker, a TRIO Program Director, a community college and university instructor, a learning

center director, an academic advisor and counselor, Director of the Kellogg Institute, Director of the National Center for Developmental Education, Director of the Doctoral Program in Developmental Education at Grambling State University, President of the National Association for Developmental Education, Chair of the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations, and professor and coordinator of Appalachian State University's graduate program in adult and developmental education. He is the author of 7 books and over 100 articles, book chapters, and monographs on developmental instruction, evaluation, administration, professional development, and best practices. He has delivered over 100 keynote speeches at regional, national, and international conferences and has presented over 250 conference workshops and sessions. He is widely known as a speaker and consultant—including service for the Community College Research Center, the Lumina Achieving the Dream project, and the Gates Completion by Design Project--and is regularly quoted in the media for his views on adult and developmental education. Recently the National College Learning Center Association honored him by naming their research scholarship the "Hunter R. Boylan Research Award," in recognition of his contributions to research in the field and the Association for the Tutoring Profession accorded him a similar honor. His favorite saying is "Good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment."

Patti Levine-Brown (P.L.B.): How do you define developmental education?

Hunter Reed Boylan (H.R.B.): Developmental education is the integration of academic courses and support services guided by the principles of adult learning and development (Boylan & Bonham, 2014).

Remediation is typically a make-up course with high school level material taught without any connection with the rest of the curriculum or the rest of the support system. If the only thing that you are offering your students is a course in pre-algebra, then it is probably a remedial course. If you are offering a course in pre-algebra that is supported by counseling, tutoring, and advising, where the course is taught according to principles of how adults learn and develop then that is a developmental course. I often say that we don't know whether developmental education works or not. Most institutions haven't tried it yet. So I will frequently use the term remediation in this interview because much of what is done at community colleges is remediation, and when people have studied it and found that it doesn't work too well, I'm not surprised.

S. Wes Anthony (S.W.A.): You have been conducting and publishing research in the field of developmental education for more than 30 years. During that time, you have also served as both the assistant director and executive director of the National Center for Developmental Education (NCDE). You have been at the forefront of numerous changes imposed on developmental education by state legislation and organizations. With all of the changes, you have seen over the years in developmental education, can you briefly discuss the historical perspective of the field?

H.R.B.: Our business has always been to level the playing field for student success. At different times in the history of American higher education, we've simply tried to level the playing field for different groups of people. What has been interesting to see recently is the recycling of innovations. Many of the methods and techniques that were being done in the 50s, 60s, and 70s--such as individualized

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and supplemental instruction--worked well then, and they work well now. During that time, there was a lot of talk about such innovations as integrated reading and writing, modularization, and corequisite remediation, but now we have concrete examples of how they can be done. If something worked in 1976 and in 1985, I have no reason to think it won't work in 2017-18. On the other hand, I do have reason to believe that none of these things represents a silver bullet.

Something that disappoints me is that many of these techniques are being promoted as the one size fits all solution. The problem with that is once you think you've quote "found the solution," there is no need for further discussion or refinement. I am disappointed because, for some people, developmental education has become a for profit industry, and there are organizations presenting what they refer to as innovations and solutions that are not really committed to the field. They're only committed to their solution. Unfortunately, there is no single solution that can resolve the problem for students who are underprepared. There are a number of methods that research has shown to work well, and using those practices in conjunction with one another can help students be more successful. Today there are many dedicated developmental educators using these various methods and techniques, and many work quite well.

There are a number of people who have been around for a long time and have a long-standing track record of supporting and promoting research-based techniques and methods for student completion. There are also people who I refer to as "instant experts" in the field. They are the ones who 10 years ago had never heard the term "developmental student," who never in their career have worked in a community college or touched an underprepared student in any way. Yet they have appointed themselves as experts in the field. I find that disappointing. There are people like me, Norm Stahl, David Arendale, Patrick Saxon, Martha Casazza, Emily Payne, Michael Rose, Russ Hodges, Sonya Armstrong, and I could go on and name more, who have dedicated most of their professional careers to this field. They have studied the field and become experts by virtue of a combination of experience, research, reading, and conversation. In my mind, they are still our best experts. There are others like Tom Bailey, Nikki Edgecombe, Peter Bahr, or Uri Triesman who have mastered the field through in depth data analysis and research. None of these folks believes they have found "the solution" or even that a single solution exists.

P.L.B.: Throughout the history in the field of developmental education, a number of peaks and valleys have occurred associated with key pieces of developmental education programs including

assessment, placement, teaching techniques, delivery models, and evaluation. Please expand on some of the peaks and valleys, both positive and negative, associated with the history in the field?

H.R.B.: Every 5 to 10 years, we experience cycles of remediation bashing. Usually the bashing begins with some reporter or legislator stating we have already paid for this once. I find this argument to be hollow. If 60% of students arrive underprepared for college then we've only "paid for" 40% to be prepared.

Usually at the end of a cycle or remediation bashing, there is regulation or policy created that is sometimes helpful and sometimes not. For example, after one round of remediation bashing in the 1990s, states began collecting data on remedial courses; a good idea. Unfortunately, after another round of remediation bashing in the 2000s, some state legislatures mandated one-size-fits all solutions; a bad idea.

The challenge is separating meaningful research from propaganda and making sense of it all.

There were also periods that occurred in the 70s, 80s, and 90s during which people got the idea that developmental education was for minority students, and this combined with latent racism contributed to some of the negative attitudes about developmental education. The truth is that the dominant group of developmental education students is white and always has been. Sometimes the negative attitudes stemmed from the elitist belief that underprepared students shouldn't be in college in the first place. These negative attitudes toward underprepared students were then transposed to the people who work in developmental education programs. Many of those attitudes remain today in that students who take remedial courses are not viewed as real college students, and that faculty who teach in developmental education programs are not viewed as real faculty. The fact is that developmental education faculty frequently have to work harder than other faculty because it's not easy to teach underprepared students.

Presently, the field of developmental education is in a new valley. Much of this is due to misrepresentation of the field. There are a lot of "instant experts" who do not understand the difference between remediation and developmental education. They criticize developmental education but are really referring to remediation. They use the term developmental education because it's what

the public and the media understand and that adds greater confusion about developmental education and greater animosity towards it. But I am hopeful that the media and legislators and even the "instant experts" will figure out what developmental education really is and realize that they should support it.

S.W.A.: Prior to the existence of various organizations that pushed for legislative changes in developmental education, you spoke at numerous conferences around the country stressing the need for certain changes in the structure and delivery methods for developmental education. Can you elaborate as to why many of the changes now taking place in developmental education programs around the country are occurring at such a rapid pace?

H.R.B.: In the past decade four things have happened:

- First, President Obama emphasized the role of community colleges as an engine for prosperity. He also emphasized college completion. In fact, I feel he almost single-handedly engineered the Completion Agenda. And for that he deserves credit.
- Second, the availability of massive amounts of money to support college completion has brought a lot of individuals and organizations into the field, some of them with more integrity than others. Some have found it profitable to become instant experts and sell their "solutions" to naïve legislators and policy makers.
- Third, as a result of this massive amount of financial investment, a lot of research has been generated, both good and bad. We have much more information on models and methods to promote college completion than we ever had before. This is great! But there are individuals and organizations that have taken good research and misrepresented it in order to make a case for their own self-serving agendas. The challenge is separating meaningful research from propaganda and making sense of it all.
- Fourth, the research suggests that remedial courses are not terribly effective at accomplishing their objectives. This coupled with the aforementioned misunderstanding about the real meaning of development education has led to unfair castigation of the field and its professionals as well as poor state policy. It has caused legislators and policy makers to believe that developmental education causes attrition, and that they have to intervene in it in order to improve college completion; as any competent researcher would point out, however, correlation does not imply causality. Yes, the research does indicate that participation in remediation

is associated with attrition for some students, but that doesn't mean remediation causes attrition. It is either idiotic or deceitful to misrepresent developmental education and then blame it for the complexity of student attrition and assume the problem is solved by getting rid of it.

It takes hard work to find out what variables are associated with improving college completion for underprepared students. We need to work on finding those variables and determining what methods will properly complement each other and improve completion rates in remedial and college-level courses.

I am generally supportive of reforms, but I am concerned that the focus on structured reform will keep us from looking at the underlying causes of attrition. Students drop out of school for many reasons, for example, family problems, emotional problems, and job issues causing issues with which they are to cope. These are major threats to success and completion for students, and we are not giving sufficient attention to these issues; this suggests that, ultimately, our reform efforts will not result in substantive positive changes. However, it is also important to mention that there are many aspects to the so-called reform movement that are quite good. For example, integrated reading and writing, modular math, and corequisite remediation, if properly implemented, should improve completion rates in remedial or college-level courses. We should not stop there, however, but should continue to explore the many factors mitigating against college completion, particularly for low income and minority students.

P.L.B.: In a number of states, the means by which developmental education students are assessed and placed has drastically changed. In some states, such as Florida and North Carolina, assessment and placement for certain groups of students is now nonexistent. However, research published by organizations such as the Community College Research Center states that federal data indicate that 68% of community college students and 40% of students at public four-year colleges take at least one remedial course (Chen & Simone, 2016). What repercussions do you see occurring in the higher education arena based on some of the changes in assessment and placement in developmental education programs across the country?

H.R.B.: Standard assessment has come under a good deal of scrutiny, and I generally agree with the findings suggesting it is flawed. I do think there needs to be more than one way to assess a student, and I believe we should use multiple measures. However, I was always taught that "multiple" means more than one. Today, too many institutions are looking at high school GPA and calling it a multiple

measure. One thing we know from psychometric research is that the more data points you have to assess a student, the more accurate that assessment. I do think GPA is a better predictor than a standardized test, but it is still not a great predictor.

If we really want to predict with greater accuracy how well a student is going to perform, we have to measure something more than their cognitive ability. We also have to measure their affective characteristics. We have to look at life circumstances. I agree that, historically, too many students have been placed in remedial courses when they might have succeeded in college-level courses. But I don't think that number is as great as some others have suggested.

If we put standard indicators together with assessment of affective characteristics and life circumstances, we will improve assessment and placement dramatically. Right now, we are not doing this very often or very well. Instead, policy makers are simply trying to find ways to put fewer

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students into remedial courses. The consequence is that, although we will place fewer students into remedial courses and more students into college-level courses, we will also have more students fail college-level courses.

It depends which spin you want to put on these two pieces of data, as to whether that's good or bad. More people passing college courses is good. More people failing college courses and having an F on their record with all the implications for progression and financial aid is bad. But no one is yet admitting that's happening in many cases.

S.W.A.: A good deal of research has been published stressing the importance of training for those who work with underprepared students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Maxwell, 1997; Roueche & Wheeler, 1973). Twenty-five years ago, you and your colleagues at NCDE stated that research had validated the need for faculty and staff working with developmental education programs to be specifically trained in techniques, models, and methods associated with helping underprepared learners (Boylan, Bonham, Claxton, & Bliss, 1992). Please elaborate why professional development

is so important for developmental education professionals.

H.R.B.: Most educators who work in colleges and universities are not taught about adult learning and development. Referring back to the definition of developmental education that I discussed earlier and the importance of integrating courses and support services, then professional development is one of the tools to help faculty understand how students learn and accomplish this integration. Neither one of these two things, integrating courses and services or using principles of adult learning and development, are likely to happen unless faculty are given both the reasons and the methods for making this happen. I am of the opinion that the best way of accomplishing this is by providing consistent and ongoing professional development for faculty.

Historically, the typical community college hired adjunct faculty to teach remedial courses and provided little or no training to do so. As a result, the weakest students were taught by the people who were given the least amount of training and support. And then we discovered that students weren't completing remediation. Why was anyone surprised?

Professional development may be delivered in a variety of ways from bringing in external trainers to having faculty read and discuss books and articles on teaching and learning. It doesn't have to be expensive. It does, however, have to be ongoing, and incentives have to be provided for participation. Professional development should also be particularly directed to adjunct faculty.

Faculty members do not deliberately try to confuse students or make it difficult for them to learn. But it is quite possible that they do this by accident. Professional development reduces that possibility.

P.L.B.: The Kellogg Institute is the longest continually offered professional development forum offered to developmental educators and learning assistance professionals working in postsecondary institutions. What is the impact and place in today's educational climate for the Kellogg Institute?

H.R.B.: Every faculty member needs to know how to integrate courses and services, who their students are, and how to promote adult learning and development. The Kellogg Institute is one of the very few places on earth where participants learn those three things, obtain resources for their continued professional development, and establish a network of like-minded educators. The Institute is grounded on the latest research and theory in learning assistance and developmental education. We bring in speakers who represent

the best thinking, the best research, and the best implementation in the field, and those of us who work with the Institute practice what we preach. We treat the professionals who attend with the courtesy and respect that they are entitled to because of their commitment to the important work that they do.

There may be other training programs that will teach good things to their participants. There probably are not many where those participants will be treated as well as they are at the Kellogg Institute. Additionally, Kellogg provides participants the opportunity to form a community of colleagues and build a network of professionals that will serve them throughout the rest of their professional career.

S.W.A.: Considering the many of the legislative mandates regarding the administration of developmental education programs that have come about in the past 5 years, how should professionals in the field approach the current climate?

H.R.B.: First, we need to stop complaining about the real and imagined injustices the field has experienced. Although our complaints may be legitimate, they are not going to change anything. The current climate in developmental education is, indeed, challenging. But those challenges are coupled with opportunities. There is the challenge of mindless development and implementation of reforms taking place in the field that can hurt many people, primarily our students. But there is an opportunity to provide thoughtful implementation, grounded in the principles of adult learning and development, by people who are committed to student success. We have to be the committed people who implement thoughtfully and ground what we do in appropriate research and theory. We have to take what is given to us and do the best we can with it.

Professionals in the field also need to be more proactive in confronting reform. We need to be participants in the reform, not be victims of it. The experience and expertise we possess must be brought to the table when reforms are being developed. Our voices need to continue to be heard about these reforms, how the reforms are implemented, and, particularly, how they are evaluated. We need to recognize that change will occur, and we need to make a stronger stand by being more actively involved at our colleges, on our campuses, in our states, and around the nation. We need to spend less time complaining and more time trying to move change in a positive direction. We have to measure, carefully and consistently, the impact of change as some of the impact will likely be better and some will be worse.

It is important to gather data honestly, transparently, and consistently. Our institutions need

to be committed and willing to support us in presenting our findings at local, state, and national conferences. We must also get the word out via newspapers, reports, and scholarly journals. We must learn to be advocates for our programs and our students. Many in the field are not well trained in how to advocate, so we have to figure out what avenues are open for us to use and exactly what we want from policy. Then, we have to make our case with policy makers.

P.L.B.: A number of organizations that describe themselves as advocacy organizations for change in education have made a good deal of headway in convincing state legislators that developmental education is one of the primary reasons students are not completing college degrees. Unfortunately, some of these organizations have consulted very little with professionals from the field before targeting and convincing state legislators to use models they feel are best for working with underprepared

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students. Is there a place for advocacy organizations in the developmental education arena? If so, what should that place be?

H.R.B.: Certainly, a lot depends on what the organizations are advocating and how they are advocating it. A good test of positive versus negative advocacy is, do the advocates claim to have discovered “THE SOLUTION.” Advocates who claim to have found the solution to underpreparedness are either fools or liars. Those who understand that there are multiple approaches to improving college completion; those who are willing to do sound research and involve practitioners in the discussion of these approaches; and those who have clearly demonstrated a commitment to egalitarianism, social justice, and educational opportunity are advocates we should trust. The Community College Research Center, MDRC, The Dana Center, and Jobs for the Future are good examples of such organizations.

It is important that we encourage our readers to apply the following criteria in judging advocacy organizations:

- Are they using appropriate research methods to study the issue?
- Are they transparent in their data collection procedures?

- Are they unbiased in their analysis?
- Are their conclusions warranted by the data?
- Are they cautious in their claims?
- Are they avoiding demagoguery?
- Has their previous work shown a commitment to social justice and educational opportunity?

S.W.A.: In reviewing much of the discussion in this interview, where do you feel professionals in the field need to focus their time and expertise? Can you outline the next steps to advance the field of developmental education?

H.R.B.: In 2005, the Ford Foundation and the American Association of Community Colleges brought together a group to discuss ways of improving developmental education. Among other things, they determined that there was a need for more basic research on effective models and techniques for developmental education and improved means to convey this knowledge to colleges and universities. They also determined that professionals in the field needed state legislators to make policy that would enhance developmental education and contribute to college completion.

We have done a reasonably good job of accomplishing the first one and have done less of a good job on the second. The Lumina Foundation’s Achieving the Dream Project; The Gates Foundation’s Completion by Design Project; and initiatives supported by The Carnegie Foundation, The Dana Center, the Hewlett Foundation, and others have increased the number of college and university faculty who know how to do a better job of reaching their students. Although the numbers of knowledgeable college faculty have increased, they are still insufficient.

The second is a good example of being careful what you wish for. Foundation funding, media reports, and advocacy groups have done a good job of stimulating legislation on developmental education. Unfortunately, most of this legislation seeks vast change with half-vast resources. Most policy has been implemented from the top-down and included little or no input from those who have had to implement the changes. This has placed a greater burden on overworked faculty and staff without providing funding or other to help ease that burden.

Probably the most important step that needs to be taken is to evaluate the effectiveness of statewide policies on developmental education. We cannot allow policy makers to implement dramatic changes without holding them accountable for the outcomes of these changes. Some reforms will have positive results and some won’t. We need to know which is which.

We should look forward to research-based assessments regarding the efficacy of these legislative/executive policies and mandates.

Fortunately, we have organizations such as the Community College Research Center at Columbia University and the Center for Postsecondary Success at Florida State University that are studying the impact of these legislative mandates. We also have countless professionals in our field who are evaluating the impact of what they are being required to do. As a result, we should look forward to research-based assessments regarding the efficacy of these legislative/executive policies and mandates. And perhaps that will enable us to move forward using what we know works and discarding what doesn't. For me the bottom line is that an emphasis on student completion, particularly for underserved students, is a very good thing. We just have to continue to explore what really works to promote that completion, advocate for it, and integrate it into our practice.

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