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The Organization of Developmental Education: In or Out of Academic Departments?

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Developmental education—often called “remediation”—has become an integral part of the community college mission, offering instruction in basic reading, writing, and math skills to enable under-prepared students to master the college curriculum. Although colleges attempt to increase student preparedness in a variety of ways, developmental education courses are the most visible form of remediation in community colleges.

Organizational Approaches: Mainstreaming and Centralization

When developmental education is *mainstreamed*, pre-college level remedial courses are offered in academic departments, such as English or mathematics, whose main purpose is to offer courses applicable to associate degrees or certificates. Courses are numbered as part of a sequence that begins with non-credit, remedial-level instruction and continues through advanced associate-level preparation. All instructors are considered faculty of the department in question and are paid through its budget. Working in close proximity in a departmental context permits developmental education instructors to mingle with colleagues teaching college-level courses.

When remediation is *centralized*, it is offered in a separate department whose sole function is to offer pre-college level courses. Course numbers reflect the separateness of the department, and the faculty communicate more often with each other than with instructors from academic departments. The centralized department may offer both courses and ancillary support services such as counseling and tutoring. Most of the instructors will be paid from the centralized department’s budget, although some may have joint appointments with academic departments and teach courses in both (see McKay et al., 1998).

Existing literature varies regarding whether community colleges prefer to mainstream or centralize remediation. According to some studies (NCES, 1996,

Table 10; Abraham, 1992) a majority of colleges mainstream their developmental courses. But other studies (Boylan et al., 1997; Grubb & Associates, 1999) found that a majority centralized these courses.

Boylan et al. (1997) studied the relation between organizational structure and student outcomes. Based on an analysis of a random sample of 6,000 developmental education students attending 300 community and four-year colleges, students attending institutions where developmental education was centralized had significantly higher first-term grade point averages, cumulative grade point averages, retention rates, and math and English grades, than students in colleges where remediation was mainstreamed. Although the authors did not report the average rates and scores for the two groups being compared, they offered their findings as evidence that developmental education was more effective when centralized.

Comparison of Mainstreamed and Centralized Developmental Education: Critical Educational Components

In the paper on which this Brief is based, two models are compared in terms of a number of educational components of remedial education: quality of instruction; availability of ancillary support services; teacher motivation and experience; students’ reactions; and the social status of developmental education in the larger college structure. The comparison was made based on existing information including journal articles, book chapters, and technical reports on community college developmental education identified in a search of the ERIC and Educational Abstracts electronic data bases, as well as bibliographies, conference presentations, and personal communications with experts in developmental education.

Quality of instruction. Since the main purpose of remedial education is to prepare students for college-level academic demands, the skills and content taught in developmental classrooms should be related to those that students would later encounter in their subject-matter classrooms. Remedial programs described as exemplary include the “integration of coursework within and beyond the developmental program” (McCabe & Day, 1998, p. 25). One way to integrate instruction is through paired courses that create formal links between pre-college developmental and college-level courses in discipline areas (Badway & Grubb, 1997). Since many remedial students plan to pursue career-related degree

programs (McCabe, 2000), the alignment of remedial with occupational courses seems useful. However, most developmental college-level curriculum alignment involves general education courses such as freshman composition, history, and psychology, rather than specialized technical courses (Perin, 2001).

When state or institutional policy mandates remedial completion prior to enrollment in college-level courses, students are barred from participating in a paired-course model since one of the courses bears college credit. Where policy allows formal connections between remedial and college-level classes, is this innovation more likely when developmental education is mainstreamed or centralized? Centralizing developmental education may serve to marginalize it within the college, reducing the likelihood of regular interaction between developmental and college-course instructors. If this is the case, curricular alignment in the form of paired courses may be more likely to occur when developmental education is mainstreamed.

Instruction can be also be aligned by matching exit levels of developmental education to entry levels of the college-level courses. Lining up these levels, at least for college composition and mathematics courses, seems more feasible when developmental education is mainstreamed because, in principle, at least some instructors who teach college-credit classes would also teach developmental-level classes. In practice, however, discipline-area instructors may decline developmental teaching assignments, and the instruction of remedial courses may be left to part-time, adjunct faculty who may not also be teaching college-level courses. If this problem can be overcome, mainstreamed developmental education may have better potential than centralized departments to align curriculum, at least in the subject areas of English and math.

The benefits of the greater use of full-time instructors in centralized developmental education programs may be undermined by these instructors' lack of awareness of the academic demands and content of college-level study as a result of isolation from the academic departments. The danger in this case is that even at the highest level remedial courses, students considered ready to exit remediation may actually remain underprepared for academic study in the content areas (Perin et al., in press; Perin, in press).

Availability of ancillary support services.

Community colleges have a strong reputation for providing assistance to support learning and are perceived by students as more nurturing than four-year colleges (Carlan & Byxbe, 2001). Programs described as exemplary by McCabe and Day (1998) provide tutoring, academic and career advisement, and time-management and study-skills workshops (Moriarty et al., 1998). Remedial students can feel lost in what they may perceive as an impersonal college environment. Support services seem especially important for students at the lower remedial levels, especially those with reading difficulties (Adelman, 1998; Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

Since the sole purpose of a centralized developmental education department is remediation, chairs are likely to recognize the need for services for at-risk students and may be more willing than heads of regular academic departments to allocate funds for support services. Further, because their teaching staff may be more attuned and sympathetic to the needs of academically low performing students, centralized departments may be more likely to implement an "early alert" system (Hebel, 1999) that identifies and refers at-risk students for counseling or other support services.

Taking into consideration both the need for curricular alignment and provision of support services, it appears that the lower-level remedial student, marked by the need for reading instruction, is best served in a centralized department while the higher-functioning student may benefit most from developmental courses in a mainstreamed department.

Teacher motivation and experience. Faculty in centralized developmental education departments see the teaching of remedial students as their primary task, while academic discipline instructors may view developmental teaching as a low-status assignment and even a punishment. Developmental teachers seem more likely to be able to identify strengths as well as weaknesses in remedial students. Additionally, hiring criteria in centralized departments are likely to include personal commitment to teaching remedial reading, writing, or math. Professional development activities are more likely to focus expressly on remedial issues in a centralized than in a mainstreamed department. Thus, on the dimension of teacher motivation and experience, centralized departments seem, in principle, superior to mainstreamed developmental education.

Students' reactions. Developmental education courses have been criticized for reinforcing students' sense that they are at risk and forcing them to take longer to finish their degrees (McCusker, 1999). Alternatives to traditional remedial courses include tutoring and adjunct courses connected to regular college-level courses (Commander & Smith, 1995; Maxwell, 1997; both cit. McCusker, 1999). These provide opportunities for academically under-prepared students to interact with their higher-achieving peers and participate more fully in college life. Locating remedial education in a regular academic department may hold similar promise. Course numberings indicating that remedial reading, writing, and math courses are part of a larger departmental sequence including credit-level English and math may also have positive effects on students' feelings about education. In terms of student reactions to developmental education, mainstreaming appears to be superior to centralization.

When the mandate to attend remedial classes is weak, some students take developmental education and credit-bearing courses simultaneously, even where remediation is centralized. NCES (1996) reported that only two percent of higher education institutions (community and four-year colleges combined) prohibited simultaneous enrollment in remedial and credit courses. Approximately two thirds of the

institutions imposed some restrictions in one or more remedial areas, and roughly one-third placed no restrictions on simultaneous course taking in any area, (NCES, 1996, Figure 4).

Since developmental education courses are intended as preparation for postsecondary study, it is surprising that students are rarely required to complete remediation prior to matriculating in college-level programs. The findings of Boylan et al. (undated) suggest that only half of the states require remedial placement based on initial assessment. Where remediation must be completed prior to program matriculation, developmental education serves as a vestibule that must be exited in order for “real” college work to begin, and some students react to the long wait by simply dropping out. The mainstreaming of remedial courses either organizationally within the college or programmatically within students’ course selections seems more likely than centralization models to create positive student reactions.

Social status of developmental education in the larger college structure. Centralizing developmental education—in effect segregating it from the rest of the college (Eaton, 1994)—makes it difficult for remedial faculty to engage in discussions about curriculum and pedagogy that occur in the rest of the college (Grubb & Associates, 1999, p. 206, footnote). The social status of developmental education may already be low within academic departments; centralizing this function may threaten its reputation even further by separating it from “regular” college offerings.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both centralized and mainstreamed developmental education models show advantages and disadvantages. Among the critical features considered, mainstreaming appears to have the potential for higher quality instruction and more positive student reactions. Centralized departments seem superior regarding ancillary support services and teacher motivation and experience. Both models seem to suffer from the poor regard of developmental education within higher education.

Lower-level remedial students may benefit from a centralized department, while students closer to the college level of academic performance may be better served in a mainstreamed department. However, at-risk students are also particularly prone to drop out of community college altogether. Thus, any evaluation of the relative merits of centralized versus mainstreamed developmental education should include both successful completers and dropouts.

In either a centralized or mainstreamed setting, it is possible to incorporate the beneficial features of both models. Given the necessary level of administrative commitment and financial resources, the following recommendations could be implemented within either model.

1. Developmental curricula should be aligned with content and skills found in college-level courses. Literacy and math practices should use actual

material and examples from the college curriculum rather than drilling in skills that fragment the literacy process (Grubb & Associates, 1999; H. Levin, 1999). While alignment of remedial curricula may be easier when developmental education is mainstreamed, there is no reason in principle why teachers in centralized departments could not incorporate meaningful, content-based, college-level reading, writing, and math material.

2. Individualized attention and supplementary tutoring are important sources of support for academically under-prepared students. Colleges that mainstream developmental education should ensure that appropriate support services are available. This may require setting up the early-warning system referred to above. A major challenge concerns the allocation of funds for these services in departments that are also committed to a wide range of college-level activities, as well as the administrative attention of program heads whose primary commitment may be to degree preparation.
3. Professional development, with appropriate incentives for participation, would help improve teaching ability and motivation in both mainstreamed and centralized developmental education. In the mainstreamed model, collaborations between remedial and college-level instructors may help the latter develop the passion that the former feel for helping underprepared students. Further, mainstreamed developmental faculty may benefit from learning systematic instructional techniques from the learning disabilities field. Instructors in centralized departments need to become familiar with the literacy requirements and content of the college-level, subject-matter curriculum. Contact with college-level English and math instructors would give them an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of developmental courses.
As currently implemented, in the mainstreaming model, instructors may dislike the assignment of teaching remedial courses. But mainstreaming offers greater opportunities to link remedial instruction to college-level material. The challenge for institutions is to raise instructor motivation within the mainstreaming model and to provide incentives for linking remedial and college-level content within the centralized model. Possible mechanisms for accomplishing this include incentive pay, caps on class size, and reduction in teaching load.
4. Whether in mainstreamed or centralized departments, developmental education students should be given opportunities to participate in college activities, especially related to the majors and professions to which they aspire. Although students’ skill levels preclude enrollment in college-level courses, instructors could find ways to provide contact between developmental and

college-level students that could raise the motivation of students to persist in what may be a multi-year remedial endeavor.

5. Learning is enhanced when students feel that they are connected with a respected endeavor. Efforts should be made by academic departments and college administrators to integrate developmental education with the rest of the college program, rather than marginalizing it within departments or within the college. Doing so seems appropriate given the extent of remedial need in the student body and the growing centrality of developmental education to the community college mission.

Although centralized models have been recommended by experts in the field, Boylan and his colleagues (Boylan et al., 1997; Boylan, 1999) suggest that the better results obtained are not from the centralization itself but from the fact that this structure makes it easier to coordinate student services and promote communication among staff. While coordination and communication may come more easily in a centralized model, they are entirely possible in a situation where remedial education is incorporated in a larger department. Both mainstreamed and centralized models have good potential to prepare students for postsecondary academic work as long as the college demonstrates commitment to the ongoing improvement of developmental education in whatever form is institutionally appropriate. ❁

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