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Brief 15: Developing Students: Associate Academic Deans Weigh In

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
November 2002

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

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Developing Students

Developing Students: Associate Academic Deans Weigh In

Perhaps more than most academic issues, remedial education evokes fervent emotions and unyielding opinions. Consensus is hard to reach even about the nomenclature, with remedial conveying a sense of deficiency in need of correction pitted against the developmental approach that focuses on change and growth. On campus, the many aspects of the controversy often get voiced in questions rather than answers: What can we do to help these students? Why were these students accepted? Who should and who will teach in these remedial programs? Should we in higher education, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, still be talking about this issue?

Members of NERCHE's Associate Academic Deans Think Tank tackled this topic in one of their recent meetings.

The facts, according to a 1996 NCES study, indicate that 30 percent of all entering freshman require remedial education. At the community college level, the percentage jumps to 41 percent. Eighty-one percent of all four-year institutions in the nation offer some form of remedial education. The statistics have a way of cutting through the layers of debate: With the population of remedial students growing, all colleges must find ways to address the needs of these students.

It need not be said that time and resources are scarce on all but the most well endowed campuses. As it stands, think tank members report that faculty teaching developmental education—which can be one of the most difficult jobs on campus—tend to put in more hours than do their colleagues who teach in regular programs. Unlike many other faculty, developmental educators must first motivate students before they can begin to learn. They must convince students, hoping to graduate in four years, that it is in their best interest to take noncredit developmental courses. Often these faculty become discouraged with the workload. Yet as colleges enroll more students in need of remedial instruction, they may need to have non-specialized faculty introduce developmental approaches into their pedagogy. Few faculty, though experts in content areas, have skills to teach these students and will need to acquire these skills through workshops, peer coaching, and other faculty development programs. Fewer faculty will be willing to make such a change without appropriate rewards—such as mini-grants and acknowledgement in promotion and tenure standards—that demonstrate the importance of the effort.

Students at elite institutions enter with the ability to teach themselves in collaborative ways. Students in need of remedial instruction need to acquire the strategies that will enable them to develop a hunger for learning, to teach themselves, and to learn in collaboration with other students. If having certain “values”, such as the desire to be successful or abilities to “self-learn” are important components of success at the college level, they need to be conceptualized so that they can be taught.

Developmental education, with its learning-centered pedagogy, can be a model for teaching and learning that can serve students across the curriculum. In fact, an environment that respects the skills and competencies that all students bring with them can be very invigorating for students and faculty alike. By adopting a learning-centered pedagogy in all classrooms, institutions can work toward meeting the needs of remedial students while stimulating and retaining those who are more advanced. This approach would also address the issue of consistency between developmental courses and courses in the regular program. Too often, students are able to pass their developmental courses, but then must transition into courses that do not reinforce skills learned, leading to serious student retention problems.

The controversy surrounding developmental education will not find resolution any time soon. The need for systematic attention to developmental needs on many campuses is only increasing. NERCHE's Associate Academic Deans suggest the following strategies for institutions to respond to these students.

- Adopt a competency-based curriculum in areas such as general education that can be prescriptive enough to guide students toward skill development. Students can begin by examining and writing about their own learning styles.
- Earmark funds for faculty development and revisit faculty rewards structures in light of these new pedagogical directions.
- Develop support systems for developmental students that include counseling and appropriate advising.
- Conceptualize the skills and competencies for college work, identify where students are with regard to them, and measure the changes over time. There need to be measures that evaluate broad competencies, such as community organizing, and how those competencies can be transferred to more traditional course work.

- Educate members of the institution, especially faculty, about the changing student profile and its implications for teaching and learning.
- Align developmental courses with those in the regular curriculum. Explore teaching pedagogies from developmental approaches that might prove effective in the conventional classrooms.
- Actively seek information on best practices and model programs for developmental education at institutions similar to one's own.
- Explore opportunities for dialogue with feeder high school systems about the skills students need to have for college.

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Do you have a response to the issues raised in this Brief? NERCHE welcomes your comments. If you would you like more information on NERCHE think Tanks and other programs, please contact us at:

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