

DEVELOPING VOICES: A STUDY OF DEVELOPMENTAL  
EDUCATION STUDENTS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES  
OF INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL  
ATTRIBUTES NECESSARY  
FOR ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS

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PREVIEW

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by

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## Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of developmental education students about developmental education. Developmental education students are, perhaps, the largest stakeholders in developmental education, yet we have not made a habit of soliciting their opinions on the programs offered to them, the faculty who teach them, or the expectations of them. In a phenomenological study, using in-depth interviewing, seven first-semester, exit-level developmental education students shared their thoughts about developmental education. The participants were all Latinos/as attending a Latino majority four-year public institution located in a Latino majority city. The primary theoretical framework used to analyze their responses was Rendón's (1994) validation theory.

The study resulted in three particularly interesting insights. First, the participants exhibited an overwhelming sense of confidence in themselves as students, an unexpected finding in relation to validation theory. Second, they felt very strongly that developmental education belongs at postsecondary institutions. Third, when they spoke of their developmental education instructors, they assigned them many of the same characteristics that they associated with high school teachers. Many of these characteristics are also noted by Rendón as increasing validation for non-traditional, culturally diverse students, thus increasing their chances for succeeding in higher education. The participants assigned less positive characteristics to many of their college-level instructors.

This study suggests that all faculty members need to be introduced to validation theory and trained in validation techniques that support student learning. The study also supports the idea that greater collaboration should occur between secondary and post-secondary institutions to help students avoid developmental education placement altogether.

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## CHAPTER ONE

In the autumn of 2005, I conducted a phenomenological study with seven Latino/a exit-level developmental education students attending a Latino majority four-year public institution. In chapter 1, I share how I became interested in this topic, this population of students, and the history that accompanies both. In chapter 2, I create a context for this study at the state and local level. In chapter 3, I write about the methodological choices involved in setting up the study. Research design is presented in chapter 4. Chapter 5 consists of brief vignettes about each of the participants in the study. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 discuss the three major themes that emerged from the data. Finally, in chapter 9, I relate my perceptions of the implications of this study and suggest some actions that might be taken.

### Developmental Education: A Historical Perspective

How does one become an educator who specializes in developmental education? While many of us grow up planning to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, or teachers, I do not believe that most of us who become developmental educators head off for college with the desire to one day work in a developmental education program. Developmental education is not a field, I believe, that most people are even aware exists. Serendipity plays a major role for most of us.

### Falling into Developmental Education

Serendipity certainly played a large part in how I ended up working in developmental education. Instead of entering the public school system as a teacher after I completed my undergraduate degree as an education major at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), I immediately started on a master's degree in Professional Writing and Rhetoric and became a teaching assistant (TA). The TAship allowed me to teach first-year composition courses under the supervision of my mentor.

However, I needed to earn more money than the TAschip offered. That need led me to my institution's Tutoring and Learning Center (TLC). The TLC was the department on campus that offered non-course-based remediation for students designated as developmental by my state's college assessment program, the Texas Academic Success Program (TASP). Hence my first experiences teaching developmental students.

After I received my master's degree in English, I still had no desire to go into the public education system. I wanted to stay in higher education. I love teaching young adults. At my institution, with only a master's degree and very few full-time lecturer positions available, this meant that I joined the ranks of part-time faculty. In order to get enough jobs to make the effort worthwhile, I taught English composition classes (both college-level and developmental) at both UTEP and the local community college, El Paso Community College (EPCC). In addition, I continued to teach for the TLC.

I continued this lifestyle for a number of years. I then was hired as the Director of Developmental English at UTEP. This had not been my career goal. My goal was to teach in higher education. This position came open, I applied, I had some experience in the field, I got the job, and, now, this was my field – developmental education. In order to have a full time position in higher education, this was the type of position that was open to me. I took it. What was my training for this position? It was virtually nil. All I had to offer was my experience as a part-time instructor of Developmental English courses. I fell into my field. I did not select it. It was simply the field in which I could find full time work in higher education.

In the intervening years, I have become very grateful for the series of events that led me to this field, but the journey was not planned. The training and education that I have received in developmental education has happened *since* I became director of a Developmental English

program and since I committed myself to this field. Unfortunately, I do not believe that my story is unusual. Again, I will state my belief that most of us in developmental education simply ended up in developmental education. Few of us planned to be here.

From my perspective, developmental education as a field reflects this decidedly non-academic, unplanned, unintentional approach. While most institutions of higher education deliberately and thoughtfully create and offer their mathematics programs, their history curricula, and their English courses, developmental education appears to be a more reactive discipline. A state law is created that requires the identification and remediation of non-college ready students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996) or the faculty become concerned about the overall preparedness of entering freshmen and demand the implementation of programs to help prepare students for the rigors of college study (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Rudolph, 1990). These are the reasons why developmental education programs exist at most institutions (Brubacher & Rudy; Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Rudolph). A population of students is identified as academically problematic, and someone determines that a program must be created to take care of this problem. And just as I, and so many of my developmental education colleagues, ended up teaching developmental education courses by default, so to do institutions end up offering developmental education programs.

I fell into developmental education. I did not even realize how true that statement was until UTEP sent me to the Kellogg Institute at the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University in the summer of 2001. The Kellogg Institute provides intensive training for and certification as developmental education specialists (National Center for Developmental Education [NADE], 2006). While at Kellogg, I came to realize that while I was very good at helping students in my Developmental English program clear the technical aspects

of the reading and writing portions of the TASP, I knew nothing about the field of developmental education. I came to realize that very few people at my institution knew anything about the discipline of developmental education. I further came to realize that the knowledge base of developmental education is not particularly broad as comparatively little research has been done in this field.

By this time I had moved from Developmental English to direct the Tutoring and Learning Center. I was no longer directly responsible for any course-based developmental education courses, but I still worked with such students via non-course-based remediation offered by the TLC. But regardless of my placement at the institution, my experiences at Kellogg had forced me to conclude that the students who entered UTEP's developmental education program deserved educators who cared about *their* specific needs. These students deserved programs that reflected thoughtful development, analysis, and evaluation. They required instructors who taught their classes not because the instructors could not find jobs elsewhere on campus in traditional academic departments, but because they were committed to them as students. They needed programs that were not curricular hand-me-downs from the mathematics and English departments, but programs that reflected the latest theoretical advances in developmental education research.

My time at the Kellogg Institute motivated me to return to UTEP, my home institution, and apply to the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Administration. Since entering that program, the majority of my research efforts have been in the field of developmental education. All of my studies have reinforced my belief that the field of developmental education is fairly wide open and that much basic research still needs to be accomplished. This truth was never more obvious to me than it was when I worked on literature reviews for the various papers



I completed over the past few years. The majority of the research that I found is quantitative in nature, and most of it is first generation research in that it provides base line information concerning who takes, offers, and teaches developmental education (Boylan, 1999; Brenneman & Haarlow, 1998; Parsad & Lewis, 2003). But even that information is often cursory and fails to go much beyond the obvious factors of race, gender, SAT/ACT scores, and types of programs offered in which types of institutions. Virtually all of the qualitative research that I found is specific to an academic discipline within developmental education (generally composition or reading) or tied to multiculturalism (Higbee, Lundell, & Duranczyk, 2002, 2003) or student development theory (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

### *Defining Developmental Education*

Among my other discoveries as I learned more about developmental education was that the term developmental education has several different definitions. This was news to me. At my institution, developmental education revolved completely around the TASP test. While TASP had an advising component to it (THECB, 2001b), those of us working in developmental education viewed advising merely as a means to force students into developmental reading, writing, and mathematic courses. To us, developmental education was nothing more than offering remediation in those three areas. And that definition is very close to the definition for developmental education used most often by federal and state agencies. It reads, “Developmental education is limited to courses in reading, writing or mathematics for college-level students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution” (Parsad & Lewis, 2003, p.1). This definition acknowledges the rather amorphous nature of developmental education placement in that course placement is dependent upon individual institution’s determination of what entry level academic skills should be.

The definition for developmental education most commonly used in the mainstream press and by the general population is that it is the reteaching of college preparatory material that should have been taught and learned in high school (Breneman & Haarlow, 1998; Hardin, 1998; Manzo, 2003; Zeitlin & Markus, 1996). One of the problems with this definition is that the degree of college preparatory material that a graduating high school student is supposed to have changes based upon the degree of academic exclusiveness of the institution to which the student applies. So at less academically rigorous institutions, students who reach the university unable to handle higher-level algebra might be labeled developmental while students at a more exclusive institution might designate students who are proficient in algebra but who do not know calculus yet as developmental (Conley, 2003).

Over the years, as I have studied and read more, I have come to embrace the definition of developmental education provided by the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE). NADE's definition reads that developmental education is "a field of practice and research within higher education with a theoretical foundation in developmental psychology and learning theory" (2001a). NADE also includes "all forms of learning assistance, such as tutoring, mentoring, ad supplemental instruction; personal, academic, and career counseling; academic advisement; and coursework" (2001a) in the definition of developmental education. This definition goes far beyond mere coursework and incorporates a holistic approach that works with all aspects of the developmental student and not just the cognitive aspect. This is the definition that I use in this study.

## The Early Centuries of Developmental Education

I also discovered as I read the literature that developmental education is not a new phenomenon. To my surprise, I learned that developmental education's history extends back to the very establishment of higher education in the United States.

Consider Harvard. This institution has long been regarded in America as one of its most prestigious universities. I know I always believed that. In 2005, Harvard once again topped the *U.S. News and World Report's* rankings as the best national university in the nation ("National," 2005). Harvard, along with Princeton, also had the lowest acceptance rate of 10% ("Lowest," 2005). Yet at Harvard's very inception, it had to respond to the gap between its entrance requirements and its entering students' capabilities (Boylan & White, 1987). In the 1600s, Harvard students were expected to be fluent in Latin, the language of most of their textbooks. Yet many students, especially those coming from less affluent families, arrived at Harvard without the Latin fluency needed to be successful students. These students were not sent away. Harvard provided special tutors to help the students catch up. This information was not in keeping with my preconceptions of Harvard and its student body.

In the intervening centuries, a great many colleges and universities integrated preparatory schools into their institutions. They then registered entering students into these preparatory schools where they obtained additional academic preparation before being deemed ready for college-level work (Rudolph, 1990). The nation's "first college preparatory department" was established in 1849 at the University of Wisconsin (Brier, 1984). Underprepared students were placed into remedial courses in reading, writing, and mathematics until they were sufficiently prepared for college-level work in those disciplines. Eighty percent of American postsecondary institutions offered remediation programs of some fashion by 1889 (Brier).

While university presidents bemoaned the necessity of such interventions, they did not eliminate them. Very few institutions could afford to turn away tuition paying students simply because the students had a few difficulties with reading, writing, and/or math. It was much more profitable and beneficial to the institutions' continued existence when they provided alternative ways for underprepared students to gain those missing academic skills (Boylan & Saxon, 1998; Rudolph, 1990).

In 1892, when the National Education Association's Committee of Ten presented its recommendations, many educators believed that eventually the need for such accommodations would disappear. They felt that when the nation's secondary schools became both more available and stronger in their curricula, then students would be able to arrive at the steps of universities academically ready. While the report of the Committee of Ten did result in the increasing standardization of high school curricula (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Levine, 1978), it did not result in fewer students needing developmental education. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, more than 350 postsecondary institutions were offering "how to study" courses for students who were not college ready (Casazza & Silverman, 1996, p. 20).

Yet despite the long established history of developmental education within the hierarchy of higher education, I think I am safe in saying that most people, and even educators, believe that developmental education is a relatively new phenomenon (Boylan & White, 1987; Casazza & Silverman, 1996). I know that I was among this group before my Kellogg experience. Despite the presence of preparatory programs in colleges and universities along with study skills courses for tens of decades, higher education has been traditionally perceived as a prestigious exercise reserved for the nation's best minds. Keep in mind that this also translated to a predominantly

privileged, white, and male student population at most institutions for the first 350 years of American higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Rudolph, 1999).

Perhaps the very makeup of this traditional student population explains why most people are unaware of the presence of developmental education in higher education before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Young people who could afford to go to college and had grown up in a family wealthy enough to pay for healthy young heirs to attend secondary schools or to be tutored would not be perceived as having any need for remedial work once they reached college. The thought certainly never occurred to me. It is also not as if they, or their families, would be publicizing any leveling work that they had to do in order to be considered college ready.

So regardless of the reality, no reasons existed for society, in general, to question the academic quality of America's college bound students in the early centuries of the nation. But history testifies that often preparatory students outnumbered the college-level students at many institutions throughout the 1800s (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002), and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of today's most prestigious institutions such as Princeton and Harvard had entering classes where over half of the students had not met all of the entrance requirements (Brubacher & Rudy).

### The Recent History of Developmental Education

The demographics of the typical American college student changed with the end of World War II. Yes, the Morrill Act of 1862 provided the foundation and the acreage to support the growth of the land grant colleges (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002) and, therefore, resulted in an increase in the number of institutions that existed across the nation. Availability of any postsecondary institution within one's own state became much less of an issue after this act went into effect, and this did create more possibility for a greater diversity of students to attend

college. Even still, the main change in student demographics was that now less affluent white males were able to attend college and the degree choices opened up from primarily professional degrees to degrees in agriculture, engineering, and teaching (Brubacher & Rudy; Rudolph, 1990). The Morrill Act of 1890 attempted to widen the pool of students to include students of color as it withheld federal funding to those states that employed discriminatory practices in higher education (Brubacher & Rudy).

But, again, it was not until World War II ended, the soldiers came home, and the GI Bill was introduced that a real change was seen in the student population demographics of postsecondary education (Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Rudolph, 1990). While the first rush of incoming students did consist primarily of white veterans, they were quickly followed in the '60s and '70s by students of color, women, and individuals of lower socio-economic status. With the influx of these last three groups in particular, institutions of higher education found themselves needing to provide an even greater range of interventions to help these students be successful in an academic setting.

In many cases, such students had no family history of college attendance. They were often the first members of their family to attempt college. A significant proportion of these students lacked not only some of the academic skills needed for success but they also had to attempt college without any family knowledge to help them navigate the mores and culture of a college campus. Universities and colleges, especially community colleges, which did not want to lose out on this new market had to respond by providing better services for these populations. Developmental education programs ranked high among those services (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

## Developmental Education's Place in Higher Education

While prior to my Kellogg experience and doctoral coursework I had known little of developmental education's long history, I had been aware that developmental education is a contentious issue. My own advent into developmental education resulted because of employment opportunities created by my institution's attempt to respond to the state mandated Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). The TASP certainly generated controversy in Texas as to whether or not developmental education belongs in higher education or not (Horn & Flores, 2003; Trombley, Doyle, & Davis, 1998).

This debate, whether in Texas or elsewhere in the nation, reflects back to one's definition of developmental education. Is it merely remedial in nature? Is developmental education in postsecondary institutions simply the second verse of material that should have been taught and learned in the secondary setting?

### *Developmental Education and Public Education*

With one in four entering students, on average, requiring enrollment in at least one developmental course (Parsad & Lewis, 2003), one can certainly argue that many students are leaving high school unready for the rigors of college. Numerous researchers examine the K-16 Gap (Colbeck, et al, 2003; Education Trust, 1999; Kirst, 1998; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003) in an attempt to discover why so many high school graduates cannot test into college-level coursework. Perhaps Robert McCabe, senior fellow with the League for Innovation in the Community College and advocate for developmental education, summarized the situation most succinctly when he said, "Nowhere in America is there a match between the requirements to graduate high school and the requirements to begin college work" (Hamilton, 2001).

In defense of the public school system, individual school districts offer the courses that their financial status and staffing capabilities allow them to offer. Oftentimes that means that high school students are not being offered sufficiently challenging course work in science, math, English, and other college preparatory courses. Small districts especially have difficulty affording the variety of faculty needed to offer a strong college preparatory curriculum (Education Trust, 1999).

In some cases the districts are hampered financially in what they can offer. In other districts many students are not even encouraged to enroll for the college preparatory courses that their schools *do* offer. Those who are poor and of color are generally the students who do not receive the support and encouragement from their high school teachers and counselors to even dream of a college degree (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkum, 2001; Education Trust, 1999).

Several researchers point out that even if a student does complete a college preparatory curriculum in high school that provides no guarantee that the student still will not test into a developmental education course. As there are no national standards for what a student should know upon graduation or what a student must know to get into college, alignment between the two systems rarely exists (Education Trust, 1999; Kirst, 1998, McCabe, 2000; Stratton, 1998; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). So the students who graduate with honors and with high scores on their state's exit level test from high school may very well find to their shock and dismay that they have placed into a developmental education course when they arrive at the college of their choice.

The debate over why so many high school students graduate in good standing but still enter college needing developmental education is often carried out in the political arena versus