Enhancing Credibility, Gaining Recognition, and Eliminating Any Stigma Associated with Developmental Education

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One distinct obstacle faced by most developmental educators is the ongoing challenge made from a variety of sources about the credibility of this work in higher education. Despite strong histories and demonstrations of success by many programs, we continue to deal with the negative stereotypes and stigma related to our students, our mission, and the appropriateness of our role in institutions of higher education. Additionally, these issues of credibility are fueled by very real and complex circumstances—reports on student retention, achievement on standardized testing, and a changing society in terms of workforce needs and social demographics. It is important to work toward increasing the recognition of positive work being done in developmental education, particularly that which eliminates stigmas and stereotypes informing many of the attitudes that can be counterproductive and misleading.

First, our activities must focus proactively on the area of enhancing credibility of our field. Continued development of programs that can provide individual credentials such as graduate degrees, along with the encouragement of students and professionals to earn these credentials, is an important move toward gaining status within higher education. However, there is also some debate about the certification process and its outcomes, particularly as it relates to certifying individuals. Does this process serve to set people and programs apart, or provide them with further leverage and status? Additionally, the great numbers of part-time and adjunct staff in developmental education need to be highlighted in these arguments in terms of the benefits and disadvantages of certifying individuals in the field (i.e., there is not an equal playing field and incentive base for all developmental education professionals to access and attain these credentials). It is difficult to certify large numbers of people, especially with the diverse range of skills and backgrounds for professionals in developmental education. Also, certification is a prominent feature of public schools, but is it the best approach for postsecondary settings? We need to explore this further and examine our unique needs in this arena. What is the impact of individual certification in higher education, given the wide range of professionals and services?

A more positive response continues around program certification and its benefits in terms of enhancing credibility, especially in terms of constructing a more solid national profile for developmental education. What do we ultimately gain by working toward program certification through organizations such as the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) or the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)? In doing this, we also need to involve outsiders in this process (i.e., for the design, implementation, and evaluation stages) and be thoughtful in our construction and implementation of the criteria for evaluation. When considering the issue of certification as it relates to presenting broader evidence of credibility, we need to consider both internal and external definitions of what is considered credible and valuable. What is considered credible by the general public or policymakers may not reflect our internal sense of what is truly "credible" and measurable in this sense by processes such as certification. This needs to be observed carefully and strategically as we move toward adopting these initiatives. What do these measurements and certifications reveal, and whose needs do they address?

In terms of gaining recognition, another area that needs to be expanded is research in postsecondary developmental education. As developmental education is a crossover discipline, merging many fields and philosophies, we need to determine the best ways to make our research engaging to a variety of other disciplines and educators. For example, cognitive research in the field of educational psychology has been utilized as a methodology in developmental education research. Yet mainstream educators in that field may not have seen this important application as the publication outlets often remain separated, and often developmental education journals are viewed as featuring "lower level" research

focused on fundamental skill development. We also need to make clear and expand the obvious, yet underexplored, research in other disciplines relevant to our field, such as critical pedagogy, multicultural theory, and research on discourse and communication. Additionally, we should consider the benefits of working across mainstream research organizations such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) to increase our profile as a research entity. As definitions of developmental education expand, this needs to be equally reflected in our future research agenda. The identification of our research priorities is necessary in response to these challenges to our credibility. Issues of student retention, minority education, transitions from K-12 to college, and alternative approaches such as learning communities and mainstreaming are key areas. Internally we need to shape this agenda in response to these public challenges to our work and calls for our expertise. Also, we need to work toward gaining funding from well-known granting agencies to secure an ongoing relationship with the means necessary to support and expand this agenda. A thoughtful and sustainable research agenda is key to creating a long-term increase in our credibility as a field.

Another key issue in gaining credibility is to find a way to address issues of retention that frequently fuel concerns about the role of developmental education. Creating seamless transitions for students from K-12 into higher education, and retaining them successfully through graduation, are important issues for entire school systems, not just developmental education providers and their programs. This notion requires stronger collaborations with other departments and administrators in addressing the long-range questions about how students make these transitions into other programs. Again, the mainstreaming argument, and the integration of academic support services across the curriculum for all students, become important strategies for working toward a more inclusive, cross-curricular model of developmental education. The notion of developmental education as a continuum of services and needs is useful for all students, not just for a few or targeted group of individuals. In this way, we can continue to enhance our credibility and gain recognition with other campus departments that traditionally do not view their work along this continuum, yet also serve students whose educational needs require the kinds of support programs and educational methods used in developmental education.

Overall, the issue of gaining credibility and elimi-

nating any stigma is a conversation about long-term goals of the field. The issue of retention emerges as key to this discussion, specifically in terms of how developmental education shapes it. There are a variety of theoretical lenses and research directions that can begin to address this, and we need to examine and apply them in a way that effectively challenges arguments against our profession.

Future questions that must be addressed by developmental educators include:

1. How do we measure retention?

2. What are the key arguments related to access that developmental education effectively addresses?

3. Which other theories and disciplines can be applied to these definitions?

4. How can our research efforts in these areas work toward eliminating the stigma associated with developmental education?

5. What kinds of collaborations and partnerships will be most effective in addressing public concerns and debates that criticize and sideline our efforts?

Recommendations

1. Continue to work on the definition of retention and ways to measure it.

2. Define the role of developmental education as it relates to retention.

3. Examine the impact of alternative models such as learning communities, mainstreamed services, and freshman seminars.

4. Apply other research and theoretical lenses to this work. Our work needs to appeal across the disciplines as well and needs to be addressed by other journals and professional organizations where it is relevant.

5. Continue work on theory and research with the developmental education community in order to gain ownership of public debates on these issues, gaining internal value and self-definition before and as we answer these challenges to our credibility.

6. Explore how our work on self-definition contributes to a positive argument against these criticisms (i.e., how does a continuum and inclusive definition of ourselves as a field, as opposed to having separated programs and services primarily defined locally, work to

insert ourselves into broader conversations about higher
education and students in transition?).