

Collaborations and Partnerships: Within and Between Disciplines, Programs, and Institutions

David Arendale and Betsy Barefoot, Co-Conveners

Shevawn Eaton, Henry Levin, Dana Lundell

Sharyn Schelske, Recorder

Summary compiled by Dana Lundell

The key questions in this group focused on two basic issues: (a) Is collaboration important?, and (b) Why is it important to developmental education? A primary assumption is generally held that collaboration is a positive framework for educators. This standpoint has also been applied to research, teaching, and practice in developmental education. Within the next ten years, the issue of creating partnerships and coalitions is projected to increase as a primary educational and social agenda, specifically as national demographics have changed and as our society requires an increasingly educated, expanded, and specialized work force (Carnoy, 1997). It is within this changing social context that we must begin to consider the conditions and circumstances in which collaboration will be important for developmental educators.

Relating this trend to the future of developmental education, arguments call for increased collaborations and partnerships both within and across institutions as colleges and universities are held accountable for improving graduation rates, especially for minority and nontraditional students. Debates about the role of developmental education within colleges remain under the intense scrutiny of the past as decisions are made about what types of programs will exist, where they will be situated in higher education, and what funding will be extended to support these programs. We need to focus more closely on collaborations specifically addressing issues of accountability for student retention that continue to be placed most squarely upon developmental education programs. In taking on this question, we must look in several directions for inspiration, innovation, and support. This includes a renewed focus on our local programs (implementing evaluations, research, and new collaborations); an examination of national models and resources (national research centers, professional training programs, learning assistance centers, and successful two- and four-year models); and an expanded focus on international strategies for collaboration (Lemelin, 1998).

One issue arising recently related to collaborations around accountability includes questions about mainstreaming developmental education students and related programs (e.g., support services, fiscal resources, course offerings) into the center of primary institutions. This includes future partnerships across disciplines such as mathematics, science, English, education, and psychology departments. The concept of mainstreaming offers possible alternatives to traditional developmental education strategies that often sideline students, minimize resources, and create temporal spaces and unstable circumstances for these programs. It is essential, in the future of our work, to consider the collaborations and partnerships that will be necessary to forge these new relationships and configurations of developmental education within primary institutions of all kinds and sizes. As resources are merged or expanded to serve all students, in the progressive definitions of “developmental” education, issues of accountability can be distributed and applied more broadly to all students—not just a few who remain sidelined and compartmentalized in these programs with limited definitions of student development. Resource collaboration and partnerships like this would benefit all involved, but it is the responsibility of developmental educators to collaborate with others to demonstrate the viability, logic, and success of this alternative.

Another aspect of partnerships is creating visibility for developmental education across campuses, such as linking study strategies instruction to content areas (Blinn & Sisco, 1996; Byrd & Carter, 1997; Commander, Callahan, Stratton, & Smith, 1997; Resnick, 1993; Simon, Barnett, Noble, Sweeney, & Thom, 1993) or bringing workshops to residence halls. These examples also raise crucial questions about the quality and origin of such collaborations. Where does the invitation to collaborate start? Does who issues the invitation to do so make a difference in the success of the collaboration? It is important to note that frequently it is external pressure that drives developmental education partnerships.

For example, many developmental education units need to have strategies for making themselves known, especially in terms of identifying resources, demonstrating and evaluating success, or challenging legislation unfavorable to these programs. This type of visibility is important to foster in order to represent developmental education as a resource. As questions of accountability arise, program leaders can be poised in a proactive position as collaborators in future research on solutions to these issues.

This leads to the question of which kinds of collaborations, if any, have been successful or unsuccessful? How has this been done, or what went wrong? Some positive examples of collaboration in developmental education have included faculty forums, learning communities (Cross, 1998; Tinto, 1995), and collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs. Active questions can be posed to help stimulate these collaborations such as: How do you sustain collaboration efforts? What about incentives? What about resources like time? What about governance? Frequently there is a general knowledge, or even formal list, of who is actively involved in campus collaboration efforts—people who will cooperate, help and mentor students, and support partnership efforts. Sometimes collaboration simply means sharing these resources. As these collaborations are developed, we also need to look specifically at the programs in place that have a strong track record of leadership in creating partnerships for the purpose of better serving developmental and non-traditional students such as Supplemental Instruction (Arendale, 1998; Martin & Arendale, 1993; Martin, Blanc, & DeBuhr, 1983), Freshman-Year Experience Programs (Sanford, 1998), and K-12 partnerships and bridge programs like TRIO's Upward Bound. We need to take a proactive stance by providing leadership directly from these programs and their diverse models for providing developmental education.

Future Questions

Overall key issues for future research and investigation in the area of collaboration and partnerships in the field included:

1. Why collaborate? What are the motivations, needs, and rewards?
2. How can we sustain this once it is initiated?
3. What models exist (research, documentation, existing programs)?

4. What resources are necessary?

Recommendations

In order to foster continued successful collaborations and partnerships in developmental education, the following recommendations emerged:

1. Review the literature and research on successful collaborations seeking progressive models that can be expanded and replicated locally, including an exploration of literature in other related disciplines such as multicultural education, cooperative learning, and so on.

2. Consider students as primary collaborators and valuable resources in conducting research, evaluating, and creating new programs; they can establish a useful “insider’s” perspective.

3. Revise reward systems and develop more specific criteria for collaborative work activities (e.g., tenure criteria, monetary rewards and promotion incentives, publication recognition for co-authors, time release, changed governance).

4. Reach and prepare new faculty and graduate students through professional development activities such as forums, workshops, and certification programs that teach them how to collaborate and why it is valuable and necessary for the future of the field.

5. Create incentive grants to initiate collaborative work, and provide a way to sustain, evaluate, and share the results of these efforts once in place.

6. Create interdisciplinary task forces examining innovative local and national partnerships, focusing on developing procedures, models, and resources for future collaborations.

7. Market the need for this—why is it economically beneficial and socially pertinent, to collaborate and forge developmental education partnerships (e.g., graduation rates, minority retention, why developmental education benefits all students and society)?

8. Be open to collaboration and accept present opportunities, even in the face of adversity or resistance.

9. Stay flexible and communicate well and often recognizing that positive collaboration processes need to be taught and modeled.

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