

**Clarifying Terms and Reestablishing Ourselves within Justice:
A Response to Critiques of Developmental Education as Anti-Equity**

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Abstract

This white paper summarizes and responds to recent claims that developmental education is an anti-equity, deficit-oriented model. By defining these terms through literature focused on higher education, the paper offers NOSS members clear talking points for responding to critics. The paper concludes with an introduction to the EAI network and recommendations for additional resources.

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Student success requires “preparing colleges and students to work together to maximize students’ potential for achieving their academic and professional goals” (Suh, 2020). The NOSS Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network embraces a justice-oriented approach in which educational stakeholders engage at systemic and individual levels to create equitable, inclusive educational environments in which all students have access to and full support from resources, courses, and activities for success.

Too frequently developmental education has been portrayed as being “anti-equity” because traditional standalone developmental courses prevent students’ equal enrollment in postsecondary gateway courses (Complete College America, 2011, 2012, 2018, 2020; McGee et al., 2021; Quiroz-Livanis, 2019). In this White Paper, we briefly define key terms, drawing from higher education scholarship in order to provide NOSS members with language for clear, consistent messaging in response to inaccurate characterizations of developmental education as anti-equity. Our choice in citing broadly from higher education literature is an intentional effort to speak to our colleagues who do not identify as “developmental educators”; however, we also point readers to developmental scholarship addressing equity, access, and inclusion. We note that while NOSS no longer identifies as “developmental education” in name, our student success practices are rooted in the research and scholarship of the field of developmental education, and in using the term “developmental education,” we reference these aspects of developmental education as a particular field of study.

Mistaken (and Harmful) External Messaging

A growing number of policy-driving organizations are building reputations as equity advocates by critiquing developmental education (Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, n.d.; Complete College America, 2012, 2020; Culliman et al., 2019). Such criticisms are based upon the assumption that educational equity equates to equal enrollment in gateway courses rather than support throughout the college experience which takes into account students’ varied starting points. This messaging is disseminated through reports (i.e., *Expanding Access to College-Level Courses*), research (i.e., Culliman et al., 2019; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015), and presentations (Glatter, 2019). As a result of this powerful external messaging, developmental educators can face challenges from external forces as well as those within their institutions about their role in supporting student success.

The above examples are a small sample of the many critics who argue that developmental education is an anti-equity or deficit-based model. However, few of these critics define equity in their leveling of such a charge. For clarity, therefore, we provide definitions to ground our response to these incorrect claims.

Common Objections and Responses

Although developmental education’s critics use the word “equity” in order to justify the elimination of standalone developmental courses, these groups are instead referring to *equality*—specifically, equal enrollment in college-level courses in the first semester. These elimination-minded reformers conflate equal enrollment in College Algebra or first-year English with equal completion or *equitable support to promote student success*.

In order to impactfully utilize our voices as education professionals against microaggressions and other forms of exclusion in conversations about our work, we must be prepared to speak up in defense of our students and our field. This requires that we accurately and consistently apply definitions of relevant terms to support our understanding of and planning for diversity, equity, and inclusion in our institutions and professional organizations. Below we list four common objections (indicated with *italics*) to developmental education. After each objection, we offer a brief response contextualized by a summary of relevant literature.

Common Objection #1

Developmental education holds students back from college-level coursework, costing them additional money and putting them behind their peers.

Response

By offering students multiple access points and forms of support within college—rather than a one-size fits all model, developmental education—holistic, wrap-around student support (i.e., Boylan, 2009) increases students' preparation and thus their likelihood of passing their classes (Bettinger et al., 2013; Goudas & Boylan, 2012; Sullivan & Neilsen, 2013). Increasing students' first-attempt pass rates may decrease the total cost of their college education and increase their employability to create long-term economic growth. As such, developmental education produces higher education equity and is the most economical way for students to complete college.

Supporting Definitions from the Literature

We define **equity** as *creating and promoting opportunities for postsecondary success across groups*. While equality references equal treatment, equity requires the acknowledgment of unequal starting points and the provision of varied resources or opportunities in order to produce fair outcomes. Equity “must promote academic results and quality, so that students can access higher education and thus break the inequality gap” (Jurado de los Santos et al., 2020, p. 13). We echo Burke and Whitty (2018), who call for “a much broader conceptualization of education that pays attention to relational aspects of our social lives and the ways that this is interconnected with questions of equity and social justice” (p. 273).

We encourage members to view Armstrong (2020) for a discussion of equity and developmental education in particular or Castro et al. (2018) for a wider view on equity in higher education.

Common Objection #2

Developmental courses cause a decline in academic standards.

Response

Access requires more than simply enrolling students in the gateway mathematics or English course. Developmental education is a comprehensive system that supports students

throughout their college experience. Developmental educators help students hone their existing strengths in order to meet their academic goals.

Supporting Definitions from the Literature

We define **access** as facilitating marginalized—and all—students' entry into and participation within postsecondary education (Hearn, 2001). Access is determined by a “complex set of influences, experiences, relationships, and [familial] developments that are rooted in the family and probably start quite early in an individual's life—rather than some well-informed calculation of the future (monetary) costs and benefits taken at, say, near or at the end of high school” (Finnie, 2012, p. 1164).

Colleges have always enrolled underserved, at-promise students, and these courses support students' development to meet the academic standards of gateway and subsequent classes. We encourage members to view Castellanos et al.'s (2016) discussion of mentoring and access or Bruch et al.'s (2004) discussion of multicultural curriculum and access in developmental education. Choy (2001), Finnie (2012), and Hearn (2001) also offer additional discussions of access in postsecondary education.

Common Objection #3

Being in remedial courses makes students feel alienated from their peers.

Response

Developmental education promotes inclusion through holistic student success in which tutoring, advising, and instructional support occur in multiple spaces throughout the campus. Developmental educators build relationships with students and each other in order to promote community.

Supporting Definitions from the Literature

Student success also requires inclusion; access, or entry into college, is not enough. We define **inclusion** as ensuring that students, faculty, and staff feel a sense of belonging and support within the college community. Inclusive education is entitlement to quality education, regardless of difference, disposition, or dis/ability (Moran, 2007; Morina et al., 2020).

Morina et al. (2020) offer additional discussions of inclusion in postsecondary education. Members can also find discipline-specific conversations about inclusion such as Ainscow and Messiou (2018), Inoue (2019), or Wilson (2018).

Common Objection #4

Developmental education is a deficit-based model: it focuses on 'fixing' students who 'aren't college-ready.'

Response

Developmental education is justice-oriented. Rather than trying to fix students or simply altering a course sequence, developmental educators work with each other and students to reform the system in the name of equity, access, and inclusion.

Supporting Definitions from the Literature

Equity, access, and inclusion are necessary components of a justice-oriented approach to postsecondary education and comprehensive, holistic systems of student support. Drawing from definitions of social justice, we define **justice** as both an individual disposition to “act in ways that give all students access to knowledge” (Villegas, 2007, p. 375) and collective action to identify and dismantle educational manifestations of systemic oppression which prevent students’ equitable access to educational achievement (Bell, 2016; Novak & Adams, 2015; Young, 2014). Discussions of social justice are prevalent within developmental education literacy (Bruch & Higbee, 2002; Lampi et al., 2015; Taggart & Crisp, 2016) and postsecondary disciplinary literature (Inoue, 2015; Karaali & Khadjavi, 2019)

Recently, scholars have moved away from references to “social justice” in education in order to emphasize how true justice is not solely a social phenomenon but rather is interwoven within multiple systems and their corresponding institutions (i.e., the education system, legal system, healthcare system, etc.). We encourage members to view Hytten and Bettez (2011), Sensoy and DiAngelo (2009), Villegas (2007), or Young (2014) for additional discussion of justice and social justice in education.

Reasserting Justice in Education

In characterizing “the field” of developmental education, Sonya Armstrong (2020) describes equity as “the opportunity to transition successfully into higher education. It’s about learner’s rights to theoretically sound and evidence-based curriculum developed by expert educators.... It’s about demanding that all have opportunities to engage as active, critical, thoughtful citizens” (p. 64). Armstrong goes on to identify preserving and ensuring these opportunities for students as the most pressing social justice issue of the current moment. While an equity-based approach to student success provides students with resources or skills to succeed in college, a justice-based approach engages all stakeholders, or community members, to re-envision higher education as a space for and process of learning for the purpose of redistributing resources (e.g., knowledge) and recognition (e.g., the right to be recognized as having the authority to create and disseminate knowledge).

In terms of student success, we call for developing institutions as well as students. Institutional change is not as simple as eliminating standalone developmental classes to place students directly into college-level courses. Rather, this work requires (1) acknowledging how educational institutions often reproduce oppression, (2) striving to dismantle systemic oppression, and (3) engaging in constant self-reflection on our own socialization and assumptions.

In enacting our justice mission, the NOSS Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network provides NOSS members with [resources](#) for creating inclusive spaces and commits to standing in solidarity with all students and educators.

About the Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network

The NOSS EAI Network is a beloved professional community of practitioners, learners, and visionaries engaged in reshaping our educational institutions to better serve diverse communities of students and educational professionals. We are dedicated to elevating silenced voices, advocating for diverse perspectives, and promoting an openness to growth for educational practitioners and the communities we serve. Learn more at our [website](#).

Resources

In response to our nation's ongoing systemic failure to move from equal opportunities for enrollment to comprehensive supports for student success, a number of organizations have developed training programs, strategies, and resources to work towards a goal of true equity, access, and inclusion for all students. We encourage you to explore these resources:

- [American Council on Education](#)--provides programs, research, and resources on campus climate and inclusion
- [Association of American Colleges & Universities' focus on Diversity, Equity, & Inclusive Excellence](#)--provides articles and resources focused on DEI
- [Center for Creative Leadership](#)--focuses on business-related DEI issues that can be adopted by educators
- [Center for Organizational Responsibility and Advancement \(CORA\)](#)--offers free webinars on issues related to DEI
- [College and University Professional Association for Human Resources](#)--provides resources for cultivating DEI in higher education's workforce
- [Diverse Issues in Higher Education](#)--focuses on information about issues concerning diversity in American higher education
- [Educause](#)--provides resources for addressing DEI in higher education information technology
- [Higher Education Today](#)--includes research and discussions on DEI
- [Inside Higher Education](#)--provides DEI discussions and research
- [Journal of Diversity in Higher Education](#)--Tuskegee University's Cooperative Extension journal on DEI
- [Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education](#)--provides data on race and ethnicity to help address gaps in higher education
- [SLCC's Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion for Social Transformation](#)--shares Salt Lake City Community College's resources on JEDI
- [University of Southern California's Center for Urban Learning](#)--provides racial equity tools for practitioners in higher education
- [Wood & Harris Racelighting-BRIEF-2021-3.pdf](#)--Community College Equity Assessment Lab's (CCEAL) presentation on racelighting

In addition, as a member of NOSS, you have access to the growing collection of resources, knowledge, and allies/co-conspirators of the EAI network. If you are interested in supporting this work or learning more, we invite you to visit our [website](#) or contact our network chair, Dr. Emily Suh at emily.suh@txstate.edu.

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