

Developmental Education Myths and Facts

By Jim Melko

Legislators, the media, the public, and too many university and college administrators share many prevailing beliefs about developmental education, most of which are myths.

MYTH: *Developmental education primarily addresses the needs of traditional freshmen who are inadequately prepared for college as a result of poor teaching, poor curriculums, or social/economic disadvantages.*

FACT: The needs of entering students at any institution are relative to the general abilities of its entire population. Developmental education programs generally address the needs of those whose skills are below the institutional average. If the average skill levels of an institution's students are higher, the average skill levels of its developmental students will also be higher. Thus a student who would need developmental work at a selective institution might not need it to succeed at an open-admissions institution.

FACT: Developmental education programs do not address the needs of only the traditional freshman. Their populations include the older returning student struggling to succeed with atrophied skills, the unemployed or displaced worker who must be retrained or learn new skills, the single mother hoping for a better job, and many other nontraditional students.

MYTH: *Developmental education is just another term for remediation.*

FACT: K. Patricia Cross in her book *Accent on Learning* makes an important distinction between the terms "remediation" and "developmental." Remediation is concerned with correcting academic weaknesses, whereas the purpose of developmental education is "to give attention to the fullest possible development of talent and to develop strengths as well as to correct weaknesses." Developmental educators recognize that, even though a student may be fully exposed to basic skills instruction throughout his or her elementary and secondary education, intellectual development will vary from student to student, resulting in developmental gaps and weaknesses that are compounded when advanced instruction assumes basic skills to be in place. Developmental education thus seeks to advance the student's basic skills to a level commensurate with his or her current intellectual and personal development.

MYTH: *If we could somehow improve our educational system, we could eliminate the need for developmental education. Money budgeted to developmental programs is money spent twice and therefore wasteful.*

FACT: Developmental education is the "Great Equalizer." It does not represent a "lowering of standards"; rather, it allows institutions to raise and maintain their standards without denying access to certain populations. It is not just another instructional "fad"; in fact, it is usually not teaching-oriented but learning-oriented: developmental educators view education from the learner's perspective rather than the instructor's, and address the unique and individual needs of each learner.

FACT: When a first-grade student is not developmentally ready to learn to read or to manipulate abstract numbers, and in subsequent grades is not only unable to catch up to his or her peers but also experiences failure after failure, the student has not lost the capacity to learn - just, perhaps, the desire. Such a student is not at fault, nor is the school system which will never be capable of regulating the maturational process. If that student wants, however, to go to college, we developmental educators know how to help him or her mature as a learner.

FACT: Developmental educators have important and valuable expertise shared by few others in the field of education. When we are successful, it is because we have understood why the displaced worker is suspicious of or discouraged by education, why the illiterate adult did not learn to read, why the college freshman suffers from math anxiety. We advocate for the learner rather than the instructor, and we look beyond grade distribution curves and seek out the reasons why even a single student is unable to succeed.

Because the above myths prevail, our programs have often been under-budgeted, targeted for elimination, and misunderstood by faculty and administrators alike. Likewise, the valuable expertise and perspective we could provide to the improvement of our educational system have been largely ignored.

But if the United States wants to be competitive in the global market, its citizens must be at least as skilled as their international colleagues. Nevertheless, our nation's population is uniquely diverse, and our nation remains the grandest experiment in cooperation and collaboration in the history of mankind. Developmental education is the key to ensuring that all of our college graduates, regardless of age, race, gender, ethnicity, disability, educational or economic background, are able to reach their full academic and personal potential and contribute to the future of our country.

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