

The “Perfect Storm” of Policy Issues and Its Impact on Developmental Education

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In the past decade, a variety of political and economic issues have contributed to changing the landscape of American higher education. Among these issues is a shortfall of college educated laborers for the workforce, the increasing costs of college attendance, and the subsequent expansion of student debt. State politicians and decision makers have responded to these issues with mandates affecting the design, delivery, and evaluation of remedial courses. Unfortunately, developmental educators have had little input into discussions of these mandates while being held accountable for their success. Although many of the reforms discussed do contribute to improved college completion, it remains to be seen how far they will “move the needle.”

It is relatively rare for a sequence of trends to result in a “perfect storm” of policy making and reform. In the past decade, however, the confluence of several issues in higher education has led to a perfect storm of higher education policies, many of the policies having direct and indirect implications for developmental education. Although the products of this policy storm have had major and often negative effects on developmental education, the issues surrounding these policies have had very little to do with developmental education. Instead, they have had a great deal to do with a variety of economic factors that have shaped the policy storm in higher education.

Three components comprise this perfect storm of policy. The first is the shortfall in the production of college and university educated graduates prepared to fill positions in the U.S. work force. It is estimated that by 2018 the U.S. labor force will face a shortage of millions of college educated workers (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). For obvious reasons, this is an issue concerning not only public policy makers but also those involved in business and industry.

The second component is the continuing increase in the cost of higher education. Although their divestiture of higher education contributes to rising costs, state legislators have been concerned with these costs for nearly a decade. This issue is also of substantial concern to parents of college students and the students themselves.

The third component is the growth of student indebtedness as a result of increased costs. As of 2015, the average debt of the U.S. college graduate was \$30,100 (Institute for College Access and Success, 2016). This issue concerns public policy makers at the local and national level as well as parents and students. These issues and concerns, along with a misunderstanding of what developmental education is, have coalesced into legislation at all levels having serious implications for developmental education in many states.

Work Force Shortfalls

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce reported in 2011 (Carnevale & Rose) that between 1990 and 2010 the demand for college educated workers increased by 2.0% per year whereas the production of graduates by higher education institutions increased only 1.5% per year. This not only contributed to a shortfall of college educated workers but it also contributed to wage inequality. The authors also proposed that U.S. higher education would need to produce 15 million more baccalaureate degree holders, 4 million more postsecondary certificate holders, and 1 million more associate degree holders by 2025 in order to meet workforce needs.

An earlier report by Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010), pointed out that by 2018 the U.S. will experience a shortfall of at least 3 million workers at the associate-degree level and above. Furthermore, there will be an additional shortfall of 4.7 million workers with postsecondary certificates. The authors suggest that U.S. colleges and universities would have to produce 10% more graduates each year between 2008 and 2018 in order to meet this shortfall.

These figures have encouraged a variety of organizations to set goals for increasing the number of college graduates in the U.S. In 2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation set the goal of doubling the number of college degrees and certificates among low-income students (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009). Most recently, in 2013, the Lumina Foundation established the goal of having 60% of Americans attain a quality degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2013). All of this goal setting and projected shortfalls of college graduates have focused policy makers on the issue of college completion.

The Cost of College

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the average cost of attending a public university in 1984 was \$3,433 in 2014 dollars. By 2014, that cost had risen to \$18,110. Community college costs had risen from \$2,854 in 2014 dollars to \$9,888 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The College Board recently reported that inflation adjusted tuition increases at public universities had increased by 3.5% per year between 2006 and 2016 (2016).

Meanwhile, many state legislatures have followed a course of disinvestment in higher education over the past decade. According to the American Council on Education, state funding for higher education had declined by 40.2% between 1980 and 2011 (Mortenson, 2012). The Council projected that if state funding for higher education continued to decline at the current rate, there would be no state funding at all for public colleges and universities by 2050. Admittedly, in recent years some state legislatures have begun to increase funding for higher education, but these increases are small and remain at risk to the vicissitudes of politics and the economy (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016). This combination of increased college costs and declining state support for higher education has placed a substantial financial burden on college students and their parents, and policy makers are looking for ways to stabilize rising college costs and make education more affordable to more Americans.

Student Indebtedness

The amount of debt owed by students when they graduate from college has become a major issue for policy makers. As the cost of higher education increases, so has the indebtedness of college students. In 1993 less than half of those who graduated from four-year public institutions had any college debt. By 2015, this number had increased to 68% and the percent of students graduating from for-profit colleges was 88% (Institute for College Access and Success, 2016). Even at community colleges, 38% of students graduated with debt in 2012 (Denhart, 2013).

The total amount of debt owed by college students has also increased. Forbes Magazine reported in August of 2013 that the total debt owed by college students had exceeded 1 trillion dollars (Denhart, 2013). A report from the Institute for College Access and Success claims that the average 4-year undergraduate borrower left college in 2015 with over \$30,000 in debt, an increase of 4% from 2014 (2016).

The situation is even worse for minority and low income students. According to Huelsman (2015)

- 81% of African-American students attending public colleges and universities graduate with a debt load,
- 58% of African-American students graduating with associate degrees are in debt, 14% more than white students, and
- 66% of African-Americans and Latino borrowers drop out of for-profit colleges with debt loads.

In a study of over 5,500 low-income households with student debt, Despard, Perantie, Taylor, Grinstein-Weiss, Friedline, & Raghaven (2016) found these households to have much higher incidence of material and healthcare hardship than low-income households without student debt. These incidences of hardship were worse for those who continued to pay their debt than those who did not pay. Dongbin (2007), found that the greater the first-year debt of low-income students, the lower their chances of graduating. The debt load of college students has increased measurably over the past two decades and it has particularly increased for low income and minority students.

Completion as a Solution

These three trends—a shortage of college educated workers, the increased costs of college, and the increase in student indebtedness—have captured the attention of policy makers in the past decade. One of the most common responses to

these trends has been to implement legislation designed to get more students to complete college and to do so more rapidly. Complete College America has reported that the average time students take to complete an associate degree is 3.6 years, and the average time taken to complete a baccalaureate degree at non-flagship universities is 4.9 years (Complete College America, 2014). Legislators have seized upon these figures and decided that the major contributor to all three trends is what they consider to be the excessive time spent completing college. They

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have concluded that if students spent less time completing college, we would add skilled workers to the economy at a higher rate, the cost of college would decline, and students would incur less debt.

It has, therefore, become an article of faith that increasing the number of students who complete college and decreasing the amount of time it takes them to do so is the universal solution to a variety of economic problems faced by state legislators. It is no doubt true that increasing student completion and reducing the time to graduation should address the triple threat of trained worker shortages, increased college costs, and expanding student debt to some degree. But, as Mark Twain pointed out “the Devil is in the details.” There are probably many ways to increase student completion and reduce time to graduation but, thus far, legislators have concentrated on picking what they consider to be the “low hanging fruit,” in this case, remedial courses and developmental education.

The Assault on Remediation

Until about 2012, there was no particular legislative attention being paid to remedial courses. There were, however, some reports suggesting that remedial courses were not working well (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho, 2011; Calcagno and Long, 2008; Martorell and McFarlin, 2007). Even more influential, however, was a report by Complete College America entitled, “Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere” (2012). This report claimed that remedial courses were a dead-end because few students passed them and even those who did rarely passed the college-level course in that subject. Armed with substantial funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and others, Complete College America was able to send its representatives across the country to visit legislators, display their findings, and urge the elimination of remediation. Their argument was that students wasted their time in non-credit remedial courses that led nowhere and contributed little to retention or completion. It was largely due to their efforts that legislators began to see ending remediation as a quick and easy way to increase graduation rates and reduce the amount of time necessary for degree completion.

Legislative Actions

Legislative action regulating the “how and why” of developmental education has become the norm in several states including Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Colorado, Tennessee, and Maryland. However, with the passage of Senate Bill 1720 in 2013, Florida College System institutions were faced with some of the most restrictive mandates to date regarding the offering of developmental education courses as well as the design and implementation of these courses. Similarly, with the implementation of North Carolina’s Senate Bill 561, the majority of the developmental education courses in the state are likely to be pushed back into the high schools. A review of legislative actions in these two states may provide an opportunity to better understand what may begin to take place in other states.

Legislation in Florida

Senate Bill 720 (2013) is a massive piece of legislation that brought about a number of changes in Florida’s K-12 system as well as major changes in the Florida College System that administers remedial education, also referred to by the bill as remedial college preparatory instruction (Hu, et al., 2015). One of the more significant parts of this legislation included the creation of the Office of K–20 Articulation in the Department of Education that assists with the transition of students from secondary education to colleges and universities. The bill also required the 28 Florida College System institutions to design remedial courses to meet the needs of students who lacked the reading, writing, and mathematics skills needed to be successful in college-level classes. Although the bill did not do away with noncredit stand-alone courses, it did require colleges to offer remedial course options

that students could pursue while also enrolled in college credit classes. It also provided the option for students who were not required to test for or enroll in remedial courses to request that they be assessed and allowed to enroll in these classes if they so desired. The bill further required Florida College System institutions to advise students whose test scores indicated a need for remediation of the options offered by the institution in which they were enrolled.

Designing tailored courses was not a new process for faculty teaching remedial courses; however, the design of remedial education options was now mandated by law. The mandate included various research-based models for designing options that emphasized accelerated and compressed co-requisite models, embedded, individualized instruction that incorporated technology, software, modularization of content, and self-pacing. All Florida College System institutions were mandated to offer at least two different models for their underprepared students.

The most dramatic change impacting the number of students required to take remedial courses across the state was that the bill specified two groups of students that must not be required to take the common placement test or to enroll in remedial courses. These two groups included students who entered the 9th grade in a Florida public school in 2003-2004 or later and earned a standard Florida high school diploma, and students serving as active-duty members of the United States Armed Forces. This allowed large numbers of students to enter college without a skill assessment. It also allowed large numbers of students to opt out of remedial courses.

Legislation in North Carolina

North Carolina Senate Bill 561 was approved in the fall of 2015 (College and Career Ready Graduates, 2015). This bill created the Career and College Readiness Committee of the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The committee was formed to consider ways of moving the majority of remedial classes to high schools in North Carolina. This legislation allowed a number of underprepared students, mainly those who had been out of high school for a certain period of time, to take classes at the state’s community colleges. The remainder, however, would be enabled to take any required remediation while still enrolled in high school.

Remedial courses across the NCCCS were required to undergo a course redesign initiative in 2013. This redesign covered all remedial mathematics courses and called for the integration of remedial reading and English courses. The reform also required changing the name of the remedial mathematics course to Developmental Mathematics (DMA) and integrated reading and English courses to Developmental Reading/English (DRE).

The redesign initiative changed the course offerings on all 58 NCCCS campuses from a total of four courses (two reading courses and two English courses) to three integrated reading and English courses. All of these courses were to be taught using an accelerated model, face-to-face courses in 8 weeks and online courses in 7 weeks. In mathematics, there also had been a four-course sequence: Basic Math, Pre-Algebra, Introductory Algebra, and Intermediate Algebra. After the redesign initiative, many community colleges followed the recommendations of the NCCCS and moved the basic math course to the colleges’ Adult Basic Education Programs. The remaining three courses were replaced with eight, four-week modules ranging from pre-algebra to intermediate algebra. Another mandate from the NCCCS was what was referred to as the use of “multiple measures.” Every member institution of the NCCCS was required to exempt from remedial courses any North Carolina high-school graduate with a GPA of 2.6 (North Carolina Community College System, 2015). This had the effect of reducing the enrollment in both the mathematics and the integrated reading and English courses.

The Misunderstanding of Developmental Education

One of the ironies of the assault on remediation is that it has been damaging to developmental education because of the ignorance of most of those who conduct research or make policy regarding remediation. Remediation is and always has referred to the teaching of stand-alone courses teaching pre-college material. Developmental education, on the other hand, is known by professionals in the field as the integration of courses and services governed by the principles of adult learning and development (Boylan, 1999, Boylan & Bonham, 2014, Saddlemire, 1976,).

Unfortunately, news reporters, policy makers, legislators, bloggers, and researchers have almost all misunderstood this distinction and confused remediation with developmental education. For instance, a 2009 study of print media reporting on developmental education found that all reports assumed that remediation and developmental education were synonymous. One writer even referred to developmental education as “a code word for remediation” (Boylan, Carringer, Saxon, & Shiles, 2009).

Because of this ignorance, policy makers have attempted to reduce not just remediation but also developmental education. In their quest to eliminate remediation, they have eliminated many successful developmental education programs. In the process, the entire reform movement has ignored two important developmental education concepts. One is that the best way to serve students is to integrate support services into courses. The other is that the most effective instruction is based on theories of adult learning and development. This misunderstanding is unfortunate and it will, no doubt, hamper the college completion movement for years to come (Boylan, Calderwood, and Bonham, 2017).

Conclusion

Since 2012 legislators and higher education policy makers have attempted to address the very real challenges of shortfalls in college-educated workers, increased costs of college, and expanding debt loads of college students. There is no doubt that these issues need to be addressed, and many legislative and policy solutions are available to address them. But it is not entirely the fault of remediation or developmental education that these problems exist.

The belief that remediation causes attrition has led policy makers, researchers, and postsecondary education leaders to focus their reform efforts almost exclusively on reforming remedial courses, gateway courses, teaching models, or curricula. It is almost as if policy makers and leaders believed that, if remediation is eliminated or reformed, the barriers to college completion would be removed. Furthermore, they have confused remediation with developmental education, and implemented policies to eliminate or reduce developmental education as well as remediation. As a result, some strong developmental programs that have contributed to student success and completion have been eliminated because of the perception that remediation and developmental education are synonymous. Having done so, policy makers in several states have targeted remediation for reform, mistakenly called it developmental education, and then claimed to have addressed the problem of college non-completion. In fact, they have only addressed the problem of high non-completion rates in remediation or high failure rates in gateway courses. This is consistent with their narrow view of what affects student success and completion. Ignoring a host of situational (health and family), demographic (income and ethnicity), background (time elapsed since high-school graduation or quality of elementary and secondary preparation), and affective (values and attitudes) factors only exacerbates the problem.

Meanwhile, developmental educators have been caught up in the completion agenda and subsequent reform movement, frequently having to completely change what they do, often without having any input into the change. All too frequently the people who will have to implement changes are the ones who have the least opportunity to influence the changes. The resulting change is sometimes for the better. Sometimes, it is for the worse. There are certainly better ways to do remediation than the traditional stand-alone course model, and many of the reforms being mandated represent an improvement. This improvement, however, is unlikely to completely solve the problems that legislators and policy makers are trying to address.

In these circumstances, it is important for developmental educators to understand that they are caught up in a much larger set of concerns. They did not create the shortage of college educated workers, the high costs of college, or the increase in student debt. But they are being expected to make major contributions to solving these problems. As Uri Treisman has pointed out “Developmental educators have been charged with solving problems they did not create using methods they do not support” (2016). The reform movement has definitely changed the state of the art in developmental education. It remains to be seen whether or not it will contribute to reducing the worker shortage, lowering college costs, or reducing student debt.

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