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Harvard Symposium 2000: Developmental Education

Who Are We and Where Did We Come From?

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On October 26, 1998, NADE and the U.S. Department of Education co-sponsored a symposium at Harvard University. The topic of the symposium was "U.S. Department of Education and NADE: Partners for the Millennium". This daylong gathering led to the formation of a think tank which will continue to hold regular forums in order to explore ways to develop more partnerships across traditional educational boundaries. The next one is tentatively scheduled for October, 1999, in Washington, D.C.

The session included a panel, facilitated by T. Clifford Bibb then president of NADE, of educational leaders from primary and secondary schools who discussed the significance of partnering with higher education. It also included three formal presentations from NADE leaders that provided an overview of developmental education, its past and its future. These presentations have been developed into articles for the Journal of Developmental Education and will appear in a series beginning with "Who are we and where did we come from?" by Martha Casazza, current president of NADE. The next two articles include "Developmental education: Demographics, outcomes and activities" by Hunter Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education and "The strategic plan of the National Association for Developmental Education 1997-2003" by David Arendale, past president of NADE.

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the essence of developmental education by looking at its roots in the American higher education system and how it has evolved into what it is today. The author emphasizes that this evolution was not without tensions and that some of today's concerns existed two centuries ago. In building a conceptual framework for developmental education today, a case study of a student is provided to clarify some of the definitional issues. The article concludes with four assumptions underlying NADE's working definition of developmental education.*

In October of 1998 in Paris, UNESCO hosted a world conference on Higher Education. The conference was attended by 4200 educational professionals with government officials from 115 countries. The momentum behind this gathering was expanding access to postsecondary education around the world. Worldwide, postsecondary enrollment has grown from 13 million students in 1960 to 82 million in 1995 with an expected 200 million by the year 2025. The chair of the conference included this statement in his opening remarks, "No one--and I mean quite literally not one single person--should feel sentenced to lifelong exile from the world of learning. It is a matter of human dignity. It is, in fact, a matter of real democracy."

Where Did We Come From?

It IS a matter of democracy and for that reason our system here in the United States has been looked at for years as a model of how to provide access for all learners who have the desire to be educated. One of the distinctive features of our model is the support we provide to students, all students, once they come through our doors. In other words, we do not provide "false opportunity"; instead, educators have created a range of learning assistance programs and developmental education courses to facilitate

student success.

The United States' model of higher education has not evolved without tension. Ironically, when the nation was in its infancy struggling with how to achieve democratic ideals, institutions of higher learning experienced the growing pains associated with having very traditional, elitist models to follow while trying to open their doors to create more egalitarian models. A brief walk through history may provide a look at those "good old days" that are constantly referred to when comparisons are made to the "sad state of education" today.

One anecdote which illustrates the confusion and tension of these earlier times comes from Cornell University during the 1830's. Its founder, Ezra Cornell, "approached the professor responsible for admissions decisions and asked why so many applicants were not passing the entrance exam. The professor replied that they didn't know enough. Cornell then asked why the university could not teach the students what they didn't know. The professor replied that the faculty was not prepared to teach the alphabet. 'Can they read?' asked Cornell. The professor's response was that if Cornell wanted the faculty to teach spelling, he should have founded a primary school" (Brier, 1984; Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

Actually this story reflects more than simply the confusion surrounding higher education in the 19th century. It provides a lens through which to see that the need for supporting students who may not meet published standards is not new. Institutions of higher learning have been accepting students who may not have met their standards for almost 200 years and, at the same time, have also been developing ways to meet the needs of these diverse learners. In the 17th century, for example, at Harvard 10% of the student body came from families of artisans, seamen, and servants, and the university reserved places for poorer students whose tuition was paid for either through work or assessments imposed on the wealthier students (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976; Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

By 1871, Charles Eliot, Harvard's president at that time, lamented that the freshmen entering Harvard had "bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, (and) ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation." As a result, the university developed an exam to include written composition, and by 1879 50% of the applicants were failing this exam and were admitted "on condition." This led the university to provide extra assistance to prepare the students for college-level classes (Weidner, 1990, p.4).

At other schools, preparatory departments were being created to meet the needs of students who were not ready for college study. Indeed, they were proliferating, and at many schools their enrollments exceeded that of the regular college enrollment (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976). These were considered to be secondary schools within colleges and offered training that often led to a 6-year program for underprepared students.

The influence of the federal government was felt with the passage of the Morrill Acts in 1862 and 1890 (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). This legislation opened the doors to a broader range of students than ever before. The first Act guaranteed to each state 30 thousand acres of land per congressman to be sold for the purpose of funding colleges dedicated to teaching agriculture and the mechanic arts. This was followed by the second Act which prohibited the distribution of federal funding to states where discrimination persisted in higher education (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). These Acts ushered in what would become a new partnership in higher education: the federal government with colleges and universities.

Not only was government joining the conversation about curriculum and the purposes for higher

education, but business leaders began calling for a curriculum that more directly prepared students for the professions. Richard T. Crane, a Chicago businessman, argued that "college education, because of its classical and literary emphasis, was a worthless undertaking for any young man who wished to succeed in the business world" (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p.370; Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

In the midst of these stirrings at the end of the 19th century, educators at Harvard were describing a literacy crisis among freshmen and formed a committee to examine the composition and rhetoric offerings at the college. These Harvard Reports linked poor writing to a lack of clear thinking and placed the blame on the educational system at the lower levels. President

Eliot criticized the lack of time given to the teaching of English in both the secondary schools and the colleges and acknowledged that "so little attention is paid to English at the preparatory schools that half the time, labor and money which the University spends upon English must be devoted to the mere elements of the subject" (Eliot, 1969, p.100; Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

In 1892 The National Education Association created the Committee of Ten to examine the curriculum of high schools and the requirements for admission to college (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). This committee was made up of college presidents, and it recommended some of the college curriculum be transferred to the high schools. In the final report, it stated, "When college professors endeavor to teach chemistry, physics, botany...to persons of eighteen or twenty years of age, they discover that in most instances new habits of observing, reflecting, and recording have to be painfully acquired by the students--habits which they should have acquired in early childhood" (National Education Association of the United States, 1969).

Partly as a result of this report, secondary schools became stronger and more standardized in the early 20th century, and college leaders began to discuss the implications this held for them. Hence another partnership was developing in the world of education: Secondary and postsecondary institutions were beginning to see the need to be connected.

Shortly after the turn of the century, colleges and universities at all levels were offering developmental courses. The most common at this time were labeled, "remedial reading" and "study skills." By 1909, over 350 colleges were offering "how to study" courses for students deemed underprepared, and, by 1920, 100 study habits books had been published. In a survey sent to all state universities in 1929, 25% of the respondents indicated that they tried to identify poor readers on admission and slightly fewer responded that they also provided follow-up remediation (Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Parr, 1930). One dean, in his response to the survey, said, " I am sorry that we have nothing to report as done, but I am heartily delighted that you are beginning work along this line. I don't know anything more timely" (Parr,1930, p.548).

In some instances, colleges were granting credit for these courses and some were even hiring a full time staff and providing special training for those who delivered the instruction (Barbe,1951). The courses were offered from a variety of organizational structures and with a range of titles. Harvard, for example, changed the name of its "Remedial Reading" course to "The Reading Course" and went from 30 formerly reluctant freshmen to classes that attracted 100's of freshmen, upperclassman, graduate students, and even professors from the law school (Wyatt, 1992).

As the 20th century progressed, the doors to higher education were opened even wider. One of the most significant new groups to attend college consisted of veterans returning from World War II. The GI Bill of Rights, written with the assumption that few would take advantage of it, inspired more than one

million veterans to enroll in college by the Fall of 1946 (Wyatt, 1992). This brought funding to colleges that, in turn, helped to create guidance centers, reading and study-skills programs, and tutoring services. Following the veterans came more women, more students with special needs, and more students from impoverished backgrounds. Support systems continued to grow and to become more comprehensive in order to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the new students.

In her classic text, *Beyond the Open Door*, K. Patricia Cross (1971) introduced us to the "new" students of the 70s. She described them as those who were often the first generation in their families to pursue education after high school and who scored in the bottom third on traditional tests of academic ability but saw education as "the way to a better job and a better life than that of their parents" (p.18).

In the 90s we have come to simply expect these students. In fact, this nontraditional picture has become a rather common one. Today's students differ, however, in several respects. They have more diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They often come from homes where English is not the primary language. Increasingly, the new students come with more diagnosed learning disabilities than ever before. And the new students are very apt to be returning adults who have stopped out of the educational system for varying periods of time.

But before moving on into the next century, a retrospective look at historical information presented thus far is in order. Did that idealized model of access and opportunity exist historically? Was there an educational system with no tensions or students who were always prepared and in need of no academic assistance in order to succeed? To these questions, the answer is 'no'. There has always been a tension between those who would provide access and those who fear it will lower standards. There have always been and always will be students who are very capable of succeeding but simply in need of additional assistance.

What else stands out from the walk through history? We had glimpses of the beginnings of partnerships: connections between higher education and secondary schools, higher education and government, and higher education and the larger community. It was government that led the way to opening the doors to diverse populations and broadening the curriculum of colleges and universities. It was business leaders who cried out for more relevant preparation of their future employees, and it was higher education that recognized the need to connect with earlier levels of educational preparation. All of these connections contributed to the broadening of higher education, both its curriculum and student body. With this increasing breadth came diversity; students came through the doors with a variety of learning profiles, levels of preparation, goals, and talents. No longer could they be molded to fit the needs of the institution; rather, institutions had to figure out how to meet the wide ranging needs of the students.

Who Are We?

How does developmental education fit into all of this? What exactly is developmental education anyway? Throughout the historical perspective, words like "remedial," "underprepared," "extra assistance," "preparatory departments," and, occasionally "developmental" have surfaced. These words--or "labels," as they are often misused--are frequently lumped together with a highly negative connotation. Although it can be counterproductive to get into a battle of words, words CAN be significant when they represent an approach or basic philosophy. In this case the words "remedial" and "developmental" stand for very different educational approaches.

An examination of the word remedial and its meaning reveals many things. It is the most common

term across educational levels used to describe student weaknesses or deficiencies. It implies a "fixing" or "correction" of a deficit. For this reason, it is often associated with a medical model where a diagnosis is made, a prescription is given, and a subsequent evaluation is conducted to see if the "patient," or student, has been brought up to speed. If the evaluation shows that the student needs a little more "fixing," then perhaps another course is prescribed or, more often than not, the student is asked to refill the prescription and retake the same course. As we are only too aware, this cycle can repeat itself again and again until the student gives up, lowers expectations and simply puts in time until formal schooling is completed, or decides to drop out.

What is wrong with this picture? What is wrong with a model of education that zeroes in on one aspect of an individual and assumes that represents the whole? What might be possible effects for a student who was labeled, "remedial." Mike went to work full time at his uncle's body shop after his graduation from high school. High school had seemed pretty easy to Mike; after all, he had taken a battery of tests freshman year and had been advised to focus on basic, easy courses. He felt very comfortable in these classes and often felt that he knew more than the teachers. Mike and his friends, in fact, developed a reputation for being confrontational and difficult both in the classroom and outside. Their attitude was that they were already doing "real" work in their part-time jobs as mechanics, and there was nothing relevant going on at school. They especially felt frustrated in the remedial reading and writing courses they were enrolled in each term. Mike rarely did homework, often skipped class or was asked to leave when he became too disruptive. Teacher expectations were low, however, so, in spite of this, he passed all his classes and graduated in 4 years.

This experience in school left Mike with the feeling that formal education was for others; he would rather learn on the job where the work was exciting and fulfilling. He worked long hours for his uncle, and, because of his dedication and growing expertise, the customers often personally asked for Mike. At the end of 2 years, he was working "on the side" for so many customers that his work week had stretched to an average of 65 hours. He began paying his friends to help him out with the extra work and eventually rented space in an empty garage down the street from his uncle's where he worked evenings.

After pressure from his friends to cut down on his hours, Mike decided to leave his uncle's shop and direct his efforts toward developing his own business. He figured that he already had plenty of customers and good, dependable help from his friends. What he didn't have, and didn't know he needed, was formal training in the various components of running a small business. He knew his trade, but he needed a framework for budgeting, marketing, accounting and training.

Mike asked his uncle for advice and after listening to him decided to go back to school in the evenings and take a few classes. He registered in the continuing education program at his high school for an accounting class where he immediately began to experience the old feelings from his high school days: The assignments seemed irrelevant, and he felt inadequate. He struggled with the math examples from the text and wondered what they had to do with his goal of running a business.

How did formal schooling fail Mike? What were some of the outcomes of the remedial approach to his diagnosed difficulties? First, there were the lowered expectations for success from his teachers which subsequently transferred to Mike and his friends.

This brought with it a lack of self-efficacy for Mike; he came to believe that he was not able to achieve success in his classes, particularly the reading and writing ones. There was also the "incongruence" between Mike's self-concept as a successful mechanic and his low grades in school. These are examples of just some of the barriers to learning experienced by Mike, and they represent

some components of the theoretical framework that defines the developmental approach to working with students in need of assistance.

A developmental education approach is "...a comprehensive process which focuses on the intellectual, social and emotional growth and development of all learners. Developmental education includes, but is not limited to, tutoring, personal and career counseling, academic advisement and coursework. Developmental education is a field of practice and research with a theoretical foundation in developmental psychology and learning theory. It promotes the cognitive and affective growth of all learners, at all levels of the learning continuum. It is sensitive and responsive to the individual differences and special needs among learners" (NADE Executive Board, 1998).

These definitions of developmental education have been put forth by the National Association of Developmental Education which represents thousands of professionals who work not only in schools and universities but in the workplace and the community to maximize the potential of each learner at all levels. Developmental educators manage learning centers at high schools and colleges, direct community-based literacy programs, deliver basic skills training in the workplace to employees at all levels, teach GED and ABE courses, create "bridge" programs for students transitioning from high school to college, and develop curriculum for and teach developmental courses which range from "Strategies for Effective Reading" to "Integrated Academic Discourse" to "Organizing the Thesis."

What are some of the assumptions underlying the definitions presented earlier? First, developmental education is a comprehensive process. In other words, it looks at the learner holistically, not piecemeal, and assumes that development is a process, not a product that simply measures success by an increased test score or a grade in a skills-based class.

Second, it focuses not only on the intellectual growth of the learner, but the social and emotional development. Recall the example student, Mike. What a difference it could have made if he had known a developmental educator, someone who had seen him as a complex individual with emotional needs related to the incongruence between his self-concept and achievement in school and his low self-efficacy! A developmental educator knows from learning theory that by addressing these needs, Mike's level of motivation would have been raised. What a difference it could have made if someone had taken the time to identify his talents in addition to his weaknesses and then utilized those strengths to help him build up his weaker areas! That's what developmental education is all about.

This brings us to a very distinctive feature of developmental education and that is the assumption that all learners have talents; it is up to us as educators to identify them and use to support other areas. Suppose Mike had been given material in his reading class related to his expertise in auto mechanics; suppose he had been asked to write on his experiences with various customers; suppose those math problems he was expected to solve when he returned to school had been presented within a relevant context related to his work. Do you think Mike's chances for success would have been greater? Why?

One last assumption about developmental education is that it is not limited to learners at any particular level. The adult who is returning to school after stopping out to raise a family may need help writing a thesis in a graduate program. The English as a Second Language student who was a doctor in Poland may need help with vocabulary for a medical technology program. The senior math major may need help to pass the English Competency Exam required for graduation. Toward the end of my doctoral program, I needed assistance as I struggled to understand statistics. It is a mistake to look at learners who need help through a narrow lens; we are all developmental learners depending on the context in which we find ourselves.

Going back to the idea that the United States' system of education is a model for how to provide access, I think we would all agree that it is. Developmental educators would also add that access without the appropriate support is a false opportunity but, with the help of developmental educators across the country working at all levels within our formal system of education and helping to ensure a learning environment that extends into the community and workplace, we have a comprehensive approach to learning for which we can be proud.

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