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Remedial Education in Higher Education in the United States: A Historical Perspective

Jean L. Shaddai, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor in the Department of Education and Academic Literacy Bronx Community College, City University of New York 2155 University Avenue, Bronx, NY 10453.

Abstract: *- Remedial education, also referred to as developmental education, in higher education began in the United States (U.S.) in the 17th century and, until recently, continued to be a major component of the curricula for most community colleges, also known as junior colleges. The initial purpose for the creation of these institutions was to provide remedial education and occupational skills for their entrants. Students, who were underprepared for college-level courses or senior colleges, could enroll in a community college and register for remedial or developmental courses that were designed to prepare them to transition successfully into college-level courses or into the labor force. This paper provides a historic analysis of the need for and the policies that governed remediation in the United States of America from the 17th to the 20th century.*

Keywords: *basic skills, college-level courses, community college, developmental education, remedial, remediation, underprepared, unprepared.*

Introduction

Community colleges have historically played an important role in higher education by offering instruction in basic reading, writing, and math skills to enable academically underprepared students to master the college curriculum (Perin, 2002). According to Perin, of the many postsecondary institutions that accept unprepared students, the community college has a social and legal mandate to remediate its students. Yet remedial education, also called developmental education, predates the community college; in higher education, remediation began in the United States in the 17th century (Boylan & White, 1994). Remediation is the delivery of courses that are designed to meet the basic reading, writing, and math skills of students who are unprepared to perform successfully in college-level courses.

Community colleges, also known as junior colleges were instituted to provide developmental or remedial education and occupational skills for their students. Their primary goal was to provide academic support by offering developmental courses and programs that were geared toward equipping unprepared or underprepared students to allow them to achieve their goals of earning a college degree and/or entering the workforce (Boylan & White, 1994; Greenberg, 2004; Jacobsen, 2001). Although opponents such as Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levy (2006) and researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College (CCRC) have fought the delivery of this level of instruction in higher education, remediation continues to be practiced today in various forms because it is a necessary pre-requisite for later academic success for many first-year students. The literature has indicated that although remediation was an essential part of the curriculum in the 17th century, it remains, a necessary ingredient in community college curricula today (Arensen, 1999; Boylan & White, 1994; Clay & Southard, 2004; Dotzler, 2003; Efthimiou, 2007; Jacobsen, 2001;

Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Mangan, 2016; Perin, 2002, 2006; Schmidt, 2008)

Remediation in the U.S. from the 17th to the 19th Century.

Harvard College, one of the world's most prestigious universities, was the first to offer remedial education to its students. It was founded in 1636 with the sole purpose of advancing learning and perpetuating it for posterity. Because of the remedial needs of its students, Harvard College provided tutors for its students who were upper-class white males (Boylan & White, 1994). In the early-to-mid 1800s, when the middle class came to value education as a means of social advancement, many private colleges were founded. In addition, by 1825, the country began a network of public secondary schools, leading to college policies of open admissions for men who could afford to pay for their education. Consequently, these colleges were forced to provide tutors for their students who needed developmental education. In 1849, the University of Wisconsin became the first postsecondary institution to establish a formal College Preparatory Department to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Due to an increasing demand by the middle class for postsecondary education, by 1889 more than 80 percent of postsecondary institutions had established some form of college preparatory program (Boylan & White, 1994).

Remediation in the 20th Century: Methods and Participants

The first junior college opened in Chicago in 1901 (Jacobsen, 2001). Joliet Junior College's initial enrollment was only six students (Jacobsen, 2001). However, the Great Depression in the 1920s and the return of World War II (WW II) veterans in the 1940s resulted in soaring unemployment rates. During both periods, there was an influx of enrollees at community colleges across the country and a rapid increase in the number of applicants at Joliet Junior College (Jacobsen, 2001). This increase in student population resulted in an expansion of the curriculum to include basic skills in business and other occupational programs (Jacobsen, 2001).

The passage of the GI Bill in 1944 brought about a dramatic increase in the number of remedial offerings and forever altered the course of postsecondary education in the United States (Greenberg, 2004). Greenberg noted that before World War II, most people had not gone beyond elementary or secondary school. In fact, a high school diploma was a rare achievement, earned by less than 25 percent of the population. Before the war, education was for the elite, and it was mostly discriminatory with respect to race, sex, and religion. Essentially, education was available only for rich white males; women, blacks, and other minorities did not have the opportunity to pursue an education. The introduction of the GI Bill removed many of these barriers by providing a wide range of opportunities to WWII veterans, irrespective of their racial backgrounds, gender, or religion (Greenberg, 2004).

One of the provisions of the GI Bill was to provide educational opportunities for WWII veterans. The Bill marked the advent of government-assisted financial aid programs that were offered directly to students in postsecondary education rather than to government bureaucracies or higher education institutions (Greenberg, 2004). Although many of these veterans seized the opportunity to obtain a college education, many of them did not have the necessary basic skills in reading, writing, and math (Bettinger & Long, 2004) and were unprepared for college-level work. Furthermore, some of the veterans who were more mature and experienced requested an education that offered practical skills such as job training in carpentry, plumbing and agriculture (Greenberg, 2004). The solution was to decrease the number of courses in the liberal arts, establish remedial programs, and increase the number of offerings in various technical and occupational fields (Greenberg, 2004).

The late 1900s brought about the founding of developmental education as a formal discipline of study, as institutions of higher education recognized that the need to provide remedial education to their

students was now a continuing one. These courses were particularly in reading, writing, science, and mathematics. Colleges and universities developed remedial education programs both as college-wide programs as well as within departments (Dotzler, 2003). In his assessment of remedial education, Dotzler concluded that developmental education was the key to bringing more people into higher education as it presented an opportunity for those with limited academic skills to enroll in postsecondary education. The practice of offering remedial education both at the community and senior college levels continued until 1999 when state policies forced institutions to revamp their educational procedures and policies.

Factors Influencing the Need for Remediation in the 20th Century

Researchers presented several reasons for the growing demand for developmental programs at the community college level in the 20th century. Clay and Southard (2004), for example, surmised that the numbers had increased because social pressures had led more welfare recipients into the classroom to prepare for jobs that pay a living wage. Another reason for the demand for developmental programs was due to the vast number of refugees and immigrants who desired to earn a college degree but were unprepared for college-level work. Additionally, there were many native-born U.S. students who required developmental courses before they could attempt college-level work (Clay & Southard, 2004).

Another reason that recent high school graduates were unprepared for college or the workplace was that more than half of the states in the country did not require students to take specific core curriculum courses in math or science, and the quality of these courses was poor (D. L. W., 2007). It was suggested that states specify the number and kinds of courses that students needed to take, and that those courses should be aligned with the requirements of postsecondary schools (D. L.W., 2007). Currently, this suggestion is still essential to promote a smoother transition from secondary to postsecondary education where students become exposed to more complex academics.

Perin (2002) claimed that the two major problems were ineffective high school education and increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to Perin, ineffective high school education and increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity were combining to make developmental education critically important for individuals who wished to participate in postsecondary education. Perin further agreed with Spann's (2000) statement that although many students had completed high school, "a large number of college students lacked the literacy and mathematics skills needed to learn at the postsecondary level" (p. 1). The author concluded that the number of underprepared students may be higher than reported (Perin, 2006). This statement is significant because the numbers did not include the large number of high school dropouts as well as high school graduates who did not pursue a college degree.

Further investigation revealed that in 2000, over 70 percent of the approximately 2.5 million public high school graduates in the United States went on to postsecondary education within two years of graduating from high school (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). In addition, over 50 percent of them took developmental courses, many in several subject areas (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). According to Kirst and Venezia, the high demand for remedial education was due to the historical split and lack of communication between the levels of the public-school system. The organization of secondary schools and postsecondary institutions was such that communication and information dissemination between levels were often difficult (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Other researchers have contended that many high school seniors did not receive the proper education which has resulted in grade inflation, allowing students to "complete" high school without satisfying the basic requirements for graduation (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001). This in turn led to negative consequences for those students who enrolled in postsecondary education. Most of them enrolled in community colleges and were placed in

remedial courses because they were unprepared for college-level work (Jacobson, 2004; Kirst & Venezia, 2004). The following section discusses common placement procedures that were used to determine students' placement in remediation.

Placement Policies Used to Determine Remedial Need

Most community colleges required applicants to take a mandatory college entrance examination to determine college placement. Essentially, this was to determine if developmental education was required. According to Clay and Southard, (2004), researchers have concluded that developmental courses should be required and not optional when students fall below the cut-off score on placement exams.

At Florida community colleges, for example, students were placed into developmental courses based on their scores on the Florida College Placement Test (FCPT). At one northwest Florida college, Okaloosa Walton Community College (OWCC), a developmental writing course, College Preparatory English II, was required for students scoring between 69 and 82 on the sentence portion of the state-mandated placement test (Clay & Southard, 2004). Clay and Southard argued that if a test facilitated accurate decisions about placement, then students who scored low but did not take developmental classes were not expected to do as well academically as their counterparts who received remediation, and that retention would be higher for students who received preparatory work before college classes.

Hoyt and Sorensen (2001) conducted a study at Utah Valley State College (UVSC) to determine how high school preparation affected placement in developmental courses. The researchers found that based on ACT placement scores in the fall of 1998, 50% of all freshmen needed developmental education. Hoyt and Sorensen further reported that in the California State University system 47% of freshmen were required to take remedial English, and 54% were required to enroll in remedial math.

Contrary to common practice, however, Ohio public colleges varied greatly in their developmental education and placement policies, meaning that one institution might place a student in developmental courses, while another would send the same student straight into college-level classes (Schmidt, 2008). Despite their placement policies, the percentage of Ohio students enrolled in developmental reading, writing, and math closely reflected the national averages at that time (Bettinger & Long (2005). Schmidt also indicated, however, that the Ohio study found that students seemingly benefited from being placed in developmental courses.

Restructuring of Remedial Education: Revised Policies for the 21st Century

Before 2000, anyone with a high school diploma or GED would have been accepted in a state college or university (Arenson, 1999). Rao (2005) claimed that this open-door policy allowed applicants (recent high school graduates as well as nontraditional students) to receive a postsecondary education. In 1999, however, federal and state policies on education forced public school systems to evaluate and restructure their educational guidelines and procedures (Arenson, 1999). Consequently, many four-year colleges and universities eliminated developmental education from their programs (Arendale, 2005). In New York City, for example, The New York Times reported that the mayor organized a taskforce, that called for a total restructuring of the City University of New York (CUNY) (Arenson, 1999). In accordance with the report, CUNY instituted a policy that limited the amount of developmental education that was offered at its senior colleges. It mandated that students who were required to take two or more developmental courses should be placed in community colleges (Arenson, 1999). Consequently, the CUNY community colleges were inundated with students who were unprepared for college-level work.

The CUNY community colleges' response to the remediation problem was to design programs that would meet the remedial needs of their students (Levin & Calcagno, 2008). As a result, there was

widespread experimentation and study in developmental education content, pedagogy, and psychology (Dotzler, 2003). Bronx Community College (BCC), one of the largest urban community colleges in the country, was one of the colleges that became actively involved in researching and designing programs to successfully promote its students from remediation into college-level courses.

Discussion

Because most community colleges required their entrants to take a placement exam, this requirement placed an obligation on community colleges to equip their students with the necessary skills to succeed in college courses (Clay & Southard, 2004). Consequently, many postsecondary institutions had taken measures to address the remediation problem outside of traditional developmental courses. Levin & Calcagno (2004) concurred with Costrell (1998) that when remedial and non-remedial students are in the same courses, the large number of students requiring remediation placed pressure on instructors to reduce course content and raise grades, diluting the quality of instruction for non-remedial students. According to Perin (2002), some other measures included "academic tutoring in learning assistance centers while students were enrolled in college-level courses; institutional modifications such as writing-across-the-curriculum…and peer-tutoring where students who had earned high grades in discipline courses led study groups for students who were failing in those courses" (p. 1). The research indicated that most community colleges practiced at least one or a combination of these interventions (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Clay & Southard, 2004; Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001; Schmidt, 2008).

Studies also clearly showed that there is a missing link between how high school students are prepared and their actual readiness for college-level work (Arenson, 1999; Boylan & White, Clay Southard, 2004; Levin & Calcagon, 2008; Perin 2002, 2006; Rao, 2005). Additionally, the research indicated that language proficiency and socio-economic status influenced the academic performance and ultimate success of community college students (Clay & Southard, 2004; Perin, 2002, 2006). Regardless of the contributing factors, the research clearly showed that the problem does exist and that it must be addressed. In comparison to the historical data presented in this paper, as recently as 2006, Efthimiou (2007) reported that 92 % of BCC freshmen required developmental writing, 92 % required developmental math, and 83 % required developmental reading. Clearly, remediation is still a much-needed ingredient today for students who lack the academic proficiency to master college-level work successfully.

Conclusion

Developmental education has been instrumental in the advancement of students in higher education as far back as the 17th century. It is evident from the research that remediation was effective in preparing students with limited academic proficiency to successfully transition into college-level courses as well as to the workforce (Greenberg, 2004; Perin, 2006). Today, most community colleges across the country are in the process of or have already eliminated remedial or developmental education from their curricula. There is an assumption that the astronomical cost of higher education is a major factor in the decision to eliminate remedial or developmental education from community college campuses across the country.

Additionally, opponents of remediation such as the researchers at CCRC and the group Complete College America have influenced policy makers to discontinue remedial offerings in higher education. Essentially, they argue that remediation impedes students' academic progress (Attewell, et al. 2006; Mangan, 2016). Consequently, the doors have closed in some instances, and are in the process of closing in others such as in CUNY, for many students who desire to pursue a college degree but who lack the basic skills that are required to enroll in college-level courses. Unfortunately, these prospective students might miss the opportunity to enroll in an institution that would offer them an opportunity to earn a college degree. As an instructor of developmental education, I am in favor

of the continuance of this needed level of instruction in higher education. There is a definite need for developmental education, especially at the community college level.

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