The Stakes Could Not Be Higher: Developmental Education and Retention

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We asked Jane A. Neuburger, the president of the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE), to talk with us about one of the hottest retention topics—developmental education.

**RR: What should enrollment managers know about developmental education?**

*Neuburger:* Developmental education serves as a “second chance” for many students coming out of a non-college preparatory track from high school. For our adult populations returning to college, developmental courses serve as “refresher” curriculum in the complexity and depth of reading, writing, and mathematics required for college-level courses. Under different names, educational vehicles for delivering academic support to ensure access and opportunity have been with us since our nation’s beginnings.

Now we are engaged in a great discussion—testing how to continue in this educational tradition. We are hearing that too many students do not successfully pass from the lowest level of developmental education on to their degrees. That is actually highlighting the fact that developmental education has, unfortunately, also been used as a *de facto* “ability to benefit” measure and as a gatekeeper. Much like gatekeeper courses in the disciplines—that have traditionally been used to determine which students may continue in the major and which students may not—developmental education has too often been used to maintain a mission of access while at the same time, maintaining a mission of quality education.

Right now, the stakes could not be higher. We are attritioning students all along the educational pipeline, and for those who do stay, learning has fallen significantly behind other nations. In the most recent 2009 PISA test, out of 33 countries tested, U.S. 15-year olds scored 13th in science and 18th in math (Fleishman et al, 2010). The nation’s overall graduation rate *from high school* is 75 percent, with some states dropping to 51 percent (Chapman, Laird, & Kewal Ramani, 2010). Twenty years ago, the U.S. was the highest in the world for percentage of adults (aged 25-34) with college degrees. Now, we are tied for 10th place.
In a global competition for jobs, we will not fare well for the more specialized jobs, and predictions are that we will have a jobs gap of 24 percent by 2018 for jobs requiring some postsecondary experience. It is imperative that entire college and state systems grapple with how to assist our entire educational system, including developmental education, in becoming more effective.

**RR:** Of the new ideas that have emerged about developmental education over the last five years, which ones are the most promising?

**Neuburger:** Many changes are coming in developmental education that will directly impact enrollment managers.

**College entrance:** Colleges are now working with local high schools to align high school graduation and curriculum with college entrance and completion standards. Placement exams are being given to high school sophomores and juniors. Dual enrollment is on the table—and not just for advanced students. Combining the latter two years of high school with the first two years of college is a topic of interest. Several state systems are considering setting a floor for developmental education and working more seriously with adult basic and adult secondary education. Placement exams—which are generally norm-referenced only—are being successfully combined with criterion-referenced diagnostic exams created by the faculty; these are tied directly to the skills students will need in their courses.

**Continuing:** Many of the changes already happening in developmental education directly impact registration, enrollment, credits earned, and financial aid. Students are enrolling in “shell” courses in mathematics where they progress via computer-aided instruction. Many are completing six, nine, or more credits within this three-credit semester shell. This impacts financial aid, registration procedures, and data systems for tracking student progress. Course co-enrollment identifiers are required for students who enroll in two or more concurrent courses (at least one is developmental); paired courses and learning communities are promising practices.

First-year seminars with more intrusive advising have had excellent success; this has had an impact on the number of courses offered and the number of faculty/staff hired for those courses. Several colleges are limiting the number of attempts a student may make to pass a course; tracking this is a requirement across the college and across systems. Several systems are considering combining reading and writing courses; this will call for faculty to have degrees or teaching certification in both areas, as it will impact accreditation.

**RR:** Could you give us a brief overview of the NADE certification process?

**Neuburger:** Developed in the early 1990s, NADE certification engages faculty and others in making data-driven decisions coupled with rigorous self-study. The process involves all participants in an analysis of baseline data on student outcomes; and creates and implements action plans which focus on improving or enhancing specific services and curriculum that will be most likely to have positive impacts on student learning and completion rates. Programs are required to provide data specific to their mission and goals as well as a set of Minimum Data Template Requirements, which assist in focusing on student and learning outcomes.
NADE certification is available at the general and advanced levels. General level certification is appropriate for programs focused on improving student services; the advanced level is appropriate for programs focused on (and can access data on) student outcomes.

NADE certification is offered for developmental coursework programs, tutoring services programs, and course-based learning assistance programs such as Supplemental Instruction and Structured Learning Assistance.

Guidance and support for applicants begins with attending a mandatory, full-day Certification Training Institute and continues throughout the process when applicants have questions. Review of the application is handled by experts in the field who volunteer their time to conduct the reviews.

More information on training institutes, the application packet, and the required Minimum Data Templates may be found at www.nadecertification.net.

RR: Do you have any concluding comments?

Neuburger: NADE welcomes the attention now being given to developmental education and learning assistance. Many of the changes that impact developmental education—placement, enrollment in alternate forms of credit-equivalent courses, and progression—also impact enrollment management. NADE welcomes the opportunity to partner in efforts that help students progress more rapidly and more readily on to their intended educational goals.

References


Catherine Stover is Magna Publication’s managing editor.