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Making Up Deficiencies: Is There a Choice?

The presence of large numbers of underprepared students and their desire for access to higher education are not recent phenomena. Today, nearly four out of ten students entering two- and four-year colleges and universities need remediation in reading, writing, and mathematics. Identified by a variety of terms—nontraditional, underprepared, disadvantaged, high risk, etc.—these students are seen as a burden by many in higher education. Metropolitan universities enjoy a unique place in American higher education history. It is this historical mission that is the basis for the current commitment of many metropolitan universities to open access and service to underprepared students. This article discusses why metropolitan universities have little choice but to offer programs for underprepared students and offers suggestions for ensuring success of these programs.

Academic Preparation for College, a 1983 publication of the College Board, outlines the academic skills that entering college students need if they are to succeed in higher education. The authors state that "one of our nation's great educational triumphs is that since the middle of this century admission to college, once the privilege of a few, has been brought within the reach of a majority of high school graduates."

Having education "within reach," however, does not guarantee success. The nation's triumph is overshadowed by one of the great failures of American education—the fact that four out of ten students entering higher education lack the basic knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. As a result, more than 60 percent of four-year and 80 percent of two-year colleges now offer some form of developmental and remedial courses. Many faculty members and administrators argue that such offerings are inappropriate, especially for four-year institutions, but colleges and universities, especially metropolitan institutions, have little choice in the matter. In fact, they have an obligation to respond with expertise and commitment to the needs of their urban constituents.

This article will consider the responsibility of metropolitan universities for providing remedial and developmental programs and services to make up students' academic deficiencies. It will review the development of an "urban mission" for metropolitan universities and the historical presence of underprepared students[1] in American higher education; outline the characteristics of underprepared students and the growth and development of remedial and developmental programs; and discuss examples of program designs and guidelines for a successful program to assist students with deficiencies.

A Unique Mission

Metropolitan universities have a unique position and mission in the history of American higher education. Most of the major European universities are located in cities, not in the countryside. Early American colleges were also in or near the metropolitan centers of the period, but the emergence of land-grant institutions in the late nineteenth century shifted the locus of major public universities from metropolitan to rural settings. Even so, institutions such as the City University of New York, Temple University, and the Universities of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville are located in cities and have developed important service missions to urban residents. These institutions, particularly those receiving public support, recognize a special responsibility to serve not only the educational elite but also ethnic immigrants, adults, and other nontraditional students. The City College of New York, for example, has a distinguished record of educating the children of poor immigrants and minority groups. Similarly, the University of Cincinnati, founded as Cincinnati College in 1819 and later rechartered as a university, established one of the nation's first evening colleges with reduced tuition and fees to provide opportunities for higher education to working adults. Charles Dabney, one of the early presidents, advocated the university's urban mission when he described it as a "university of the city" rather than as a "university in the city."

In *Urban State Universities,* Arnold Grobman traces the rapid growth and development of a new type of public institution. There were many reasons for the formation and development of the new metropolitan institutions. Foremost was a demographic shift of the nation's population from rural to urban areas. Second, and perhaps equally important, was the surge of enrollments by veterans of World War II and the Korean War, a forerunner of the "baby boom" enrollments twenty years later.

The emergence of interest in poverty and urban problems by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960s led both the historic and the new metropolitan universities to examine and usually to reemphasize their educational mission. Thomas Bonner, while serving as president of Wayne State University, spoke of the metropolitan university's obligation to serve the needs of the city's diverse citizenry and to "offer access to higher learning to people of all classes, races, and backgrounds at all hours of the day and on weekends. Its population is broadly representative of the poor and the middle class, the minority and ethnic groups, the young and the old. In developing its academic programs and services, one of its priorities must be to increase access and opportunity for those who have suffered from discrimination, poverty, and injustice."

A "university of the city" rather than a "university in the city"

As the twentieth century ends, most academicians agree with Bonner

about the need to educate the disadvantaged, but many prefer that some institution other than their own assume the task. The attempt to provide access for all segments of urban society has created tension on many metropolitan university campuses that emphasize research, graduate education, and outstanding undergraduate programs designed to attract the most highly qualified students. As these universities strive for increased selectivity in admissions and for more resources to serve the academically elite students, conflicts develop between their desire to maintain academic standards and the need to make themselves accessible to diverse students in the metropolitan area. Some, like Grobman, recognize the tension as artificial and both missions as necessary:

> Some of our universities have adopted the posture of being highly selective; of accepting "A" students and graduating "A" students. That is an important role in this republic. Other universities have had thrust upon them the responsibility of being virtually open-admission institutions, of accepting "D" and "F" students and graduating "A," "B," and "C" students. It may well be that those latter institutions are playing a role that is more challenging educationally. It is a role of the utmost importance in the development of the United States at this stage in our history. (p.111)

Despite the obvious internal stresses stemming from the competing goals of academic selectivity and accessibility, most metropolitan universities acknowledge the challenge of educating the citizens of their community.

A Historical Presence

Accessibility and remedial education are not new problems in American higher education; the academic preparation gap has existed throughout its history. The admission of students with "defective preparation" was cited as a problem at Yale in 1828. At about the same time, faculty members at Cornell and Vassar expressed concern about the inadequate academic preparation of some students. Many universities during this period recognized an obligation to provide remedial instruction. In his inaugural address as president of Harvard College, Charles William Eliot stated, "The American college is obliged to supplement the American school. Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply."

Historically, the vehicle for providing supplemental education was a "preparatory department," usually an academy associated with the college or university and located on the campus. In 1889, it was reported that 335 of 400 institutions of higher education had "preparatory departments" for underprepared students. Thus, according to Ellen Brier, there were open-admission colleges in every region of the nation. Even though demographics and the reasons for admitting underprepared students may have differed

over time, students with academic deficiencies have been a part of American higher education from the earliest days.

Who Are the Academically Deficient?

Coping with underprepared students requires that educators first recognize who they are and how serious a problem they pose. The most conservative estimates place the proportion of students needing remedial assistance at one-third of those entering college. The results of reading tests would suggest that at least 40 percent of entering students can be classified as underprepared. Most observers would agree that those students, usually described as "educationally disadvantaged," suffer from a complex combination of deficient educational experiences. These include a lack of appropriate formal educational experiences, inadequate intellectual experiences in the family, and poor educational experiences in the community. Any of these factors are likely to affect standard measures of academic achievement. Common characteristics appear to be associated with the educationally disadvantaged. Those cited most often are minority/racial/ethnic group identity, poverty, single-parent families, poorly educated parents, and non-English language backgrounds.

Metropolitan universities acknowledge the challenge of educating the citizens of their community.

Carlette Hardin sees other indicators or characteristics in "educationally disadvantaged students." They are "poor choosers" who made wrong curriculum choices in high school; adult learners who need "refresher" work; individual with undetected academic or physical weaknesses (e.g., reading or vision problems); people with learning disabilities; and/or students with unclear goals or objectives. Hardin then formulates several assumptions about educationally disadvantaged students:

- Educationally disadvantaged students are underprepared. This does not mean they are incapable or ineducable.
- The reasons for underpreparedness are complex and often out of the control of the educationally disadvantaged student.
- Educationally disadvantaged students can overcome their deficiencies when placed in appropriate remedial or developmental courses.
- Educationally disadvantaged students can overcome their deficiencies when given the opportunity and time to learn.
- Assistance in social and personal development is often as critical to the success of educationally disadvantaged students as academic intervention.

Few of the early remedial and developmental programs acknowledged this listed range of characteristics and needs. Most of those programs

focused simply on improving reading and study skills. In some cases the programs were designed to counsel students out of higher education and into other options. During the 1970s, however, remedial and developmental education programs moved beyond simple study skills improvement; courses were designed to improve basic academic skills and knowledge; a core of professional specialists in developmental education emerged; and new instructional technologies were employed.

By the early 1980s, remedial and developmental education became an accepted fact of life in higher education. Research evidence demonstrates that students who complete developmental courses do acquire the necessary skills and basic knowledge needed to succeed in a challenging academic program. The result has been administrative support for such programs on campuses and financial support from educational policymakers and state and federal officials.

When an institution admits students with deficiencies, faculty members and administrators often ask the question: "How can you justify allowing into the university students needing this kind of help? These students just don't belong in college. If you know they can't make it, you shouldn't allow them to enter." The sentiment underlying this question is not limited to faculty and administrators but expresses the view of may people who believe that higher education should be restricted to those who have proved in secondary school that they are capable of learning.

Elected and public officials also may oppose support for remedial education at the collegiate level on the grounds that it is ineffective and wasteful. In their view, public funds should not be spent on individuals who have not achieved or indicated an ability to learn in high school. This position was supported in the state of Ohio in the mid-1970s when the Ohio Board of Regents, at the urging of the state legislature, refused to provide instructional subsidy funds for developmental courses taught at the state's public two-year and four-year institutions. The view that an open door is necessarily a revolving door ignores the fact that selectivity in admissions is no guarantee of academic achievement. Nearly one-half of the students admitted to selective programs do not graduate, although they are individuals with no observable learning problems or deficiencies.

Why is There No Choice?

Why do metropolitan universities assume a greater obligation for providing opportunities to educationally disadvantaged students than do other four-year institutions in higher education? In part, it is simply because so many of these students live in the communities served by metropolitan universities. In response to this demographic fact, Grobman urges metropolitan university boards, administrators, and faculty members to recognize and accept responsibility for "alleviating this overwhelming social problem."

> It is, indeed, difficult for urban state universities to locate disillusioned and discouraged men and women; to offer them the possibilities of encouragement and hope; to provide them with appropriate remedial instruction (often contrary to the goals of traditional faculty members); to make the campus community hospitable to them despite discordant cultures; to assist them, upon graduating, in locating appropriate employment; and, as a result, to help them move into the mainstream of U.S. society. Yet to succeed in such a program is the mark of a concerned urban state university. An urban state university that is not deeply involved in such a program, with the full cooperation of its faculty, is shortchanging the community in one of its important educational responsibilities. (p.111)

Serving the metropolitan community is an important mission, but there are other equally compelling reasons for an institution to offer remedial and developmental programs for underprepared students.

First, it is a fact of life that large numbers of underprepared students seek to enter colleges and universities each year and that this situation will continue for many years. These are students whom the Pew Foundation describes as the "new majority."

> Among them will be highly motivated self-starters returning for additional skills and vocational training, as well as disadvantaged learners seeking to develop basic skills. The new majority will include students who have spent a considerable amount of time away from school, and intermittent learners who pursue their educations over an extended period, often part-time, and at several institutions. Their undergraduate experiences will more likely be related to work patterns and work expectations than to the traditional symbols of undergraduate life: dormitories, sororities, fraternities, athletic teams, and marching bands. (Pew Higher Education Research Program 1990, 2)

Second, in an ideal world, students with academic deficiencies would not be the responsibility of higher education. Yet metropolitan universities cannot assume others will take responsibility or that the problem simply will go away as a result of social or educational reform. Any movement to reform elementary and secondary schools wills require many years to succeed; curriculum reforms could cause even more educationally disadvantaged students to fail. In addition, many adults who have been away from school for many years need to develop the academic skills required to succeed in higher education. Furthermore, if one considers demographic data, the population groups most likely to need remedial and developmental education will continue to grow at a significant rate. It may not seem "fair" that such a heavy responsibility is placed on metropolitan universities, but the

social and economic consequences for the nation will be substantial if the responsibility is ignored.

Finally, there are practical reasons for taking on the task of educating the educationally disadvantaged. The demographic changes in the college-age population make it clear that the number of students will decline over the next decade. Arthur Levine has studied the situation and states that colleges and universities can easily offset the demographic decline by "better serving the underserved." If, by 1998, colleges and universities could raise the college attendance rate of blacks and Hispanics as well as whites who are poor, says Levine, more than 616,009 additional 18-year-olds would enter higher education. These students would create a multiplier effect in that enrollments for those between 19 and 21, as well as for other age cohorts would increase also.

Although reaching out to the educationally disadvantaged as a means of sustaining enrollment levels may appear to be self-serving, fiscal viability in itself is a compelling institutional necessity and a practical reason for offering remedial and developmental programs.

Many Programs, Many Models

There is no single model for a successful developmental education program; existing organizational structures are as varied as the institutions offering them. For example, the university system of Georgia requires every institution to have a separate department of developmental studies in which the program chair reports directly to the school's chief academic officer. In some other states, the responsibility for developmental education has been assigned to community and technical colleges, and four-year institutions have little or no obligation to offer services in support of underprepared students.

Wayne State University and the University of Illinois at Chicago have large and successful developmental education programs administered by each school's division of student affairs. At Wayne State University, the Academic Development Unit is a division of the University Counseling Services, staffed by three developmental education professionals and several graduate students. The unit's objectives include assisting "students to learn independently, efficiently and effectively," providing "preventive assistance" and "academic support for students who lack the necessary background for post-secondary academic work." The unit also seeks to contribute to the field of developmental education "through research, scholarly publication and active participation . . . in related professional organizations."

There is no single model for a successful developmental education program.

A reading and study skills subunit at Wayne State offers general and

specialized courses for improving reading, analytical, vocabulary, and study skills. The specialized programs serve target populations including premedical students, Hispanic students, Upward Bound students, and student athletes. An Achievement Center subunit offers "individual and group learning assistance to members of the university community on a walk-in, drop-in basis." Services and programs include preparation for English and mathematics proficiency tests, instruction in note-taking techniques, developing term papers, textbook-reading strategies, and time management, and counseling in career development. The Achievement Center also designs and offers special course-specific workshops at the request of faculty members. All of Wayne State University's programs are located centrally on campus in one of the busiest general purpose classroom buildings, to provide easy access for students.

The developmental program at the University of Illinois at Chicago also is based in the university's counseling center. The center offers courses and services in reading comprehension, study skills, vocabulary building, writing skills, and test taking. In addition, the counseling center offers a variety of special programs designed to meet college students' needs, including assertiveness training, overcoming test anxiety, and coping with stress.

The University of Illinois at Chicago also has established several administrative units separate from Student Affairs for directing services toward special groups of students. The Educational Assistance Program, the Native American Support Program, and the Latin American Recruitment and Educational Services Program seek to provide academic and cultural support for students from "groups that historically have been underrepresented at UIC." In addition, a writing center, sponsored and operated by the Department of English, provides tutorial services for students who want to improve their writing.

The University of Cincinnati attempts to maintain a balance between selectivity and accessibility through an organizational structure that includes four-year and upper-division baccalaureate colleges, community and technical colleges that offer associate degree programs on the central campus and at two branch campuses, and a college for evening and continuing education students. Applicants who are ineligible for admission to baccalaureate degree programs are offered admission to an associate degree transfer program or to baccalaureate evening programs. All developmental education is provided by the two-year colleges. Tutorial and other academic support services are offered to all students through the Division of Undergraduate and Student Affairs.

Program Basics

Remedial and developmental programs prepare academically deficient students—students who lack the academic skills, basic knowledge, and

self-confidence—to succeed in higher education. If a metropolitan university assumes responsibility for such students, what must the institution do to ensure the success of its efforts? A successful program will have at least the following characteristics:

- Institutional mission and program goals must be clearly stated. The tension between selectivity and accessibility is inevitable but can be managed if everyone on campus and in the community—board members, administrators, faculty, students, parents, and community leaders—understands institutional objectives. The university's board, president, provost, and deans must clarify and reaffirm continually that the institution's obligation to serve underprepared students is as important as research, teaching, and service.
- Faculty and staff members should be made aware of the needs and characteristics of students entering the university; programs and services designed to meet students' needs should be offered.
- Entering students needing remedial or developmental assistance should be identified and placed in appropriate programs for academic support and skills enhancement.
- Academic units and divisions of student affairs and services need to collaborate in serving students, especially in assessment, advising, orientation, academic and personal support services, placement, and cocurricular programs.
- Developmental programs should be flexible and should recognize that some students have minimal deficiencies (perhaps only the need for a refresher course in mathematics), whereas others need massive remediation.
- Faculty and staff members should be assigned to developmental educational programs only if they believe that educationally disadvantaged students want to learn and only if they have confidence in their own ability to teach such students.
- The institution should determine the success and outcomes of programs through program review and evaluation and through follow-up of students.

One of the more controversial issues for institutions offering remedial and developmental education programs is where to house these units. Some institutions prefer to keep the developmental function within the mainstream academic departments of English and mathematics. Others contend that developmental education is a unique field, best taught by faculty with special expertise and methodologies. In the last decade, remedial and developmental education has emerged as a speciality area with a core of professionals who exhibit almost a missionary commitment to teaching underprepared students; most probably prefer to remain separate from control by the traditional departments. At stake, of course, is the matter of status and reward within the university structure. Curtis Miles has considered this issue and states that although not outcasts, "developmental educators are often socially suspect" because they do not have the

heritage, community support, and face validity of those in traditional academic disciplines.

Actually, the debate is a tempest in a teapot. What is essential is that educators who are assigned to teach remedial and developmental courses have what Miles terms a "sense of zeal and commitment" for the task and "a feeling of having a personal stake in each student's outcome." Equally important is that they receive respect and recognition for their work. If this is the case, it should not matter where developmental faculty hold their appointments.

Conclusion

Remedial and developmental programs prepare students who lack and academic skills, basic knowledge, and self-confidence to succeed in higher education and in life. Throughout the history of American higher education, metropolitan universities have been the leading institutions in providing educational opportunities to ethnic immigrants, adults, and other urban residents. It is this historical mission that is the basis for the current commitment of many metropolitan universities to open access and serving underprepared students. As a result, these universities place achievement of the American dream within the practical grasp of even the most disadvantaged individuals in our society. Failure to offer underprepared students the opportunity to make up academic deficiencies is to ignore an institutional obligation that rises to the level of a moral imperative, which metropolitan universities have no choice but to accept.

Note

1. Students admitted to colleges with academic deficiencies are described in various ways. For the purpose of this paper, terms such as "high-risk," "educationally disadvantaged," "underprepared," and "non traditional" will be used interchangeably. Programs serving such students are often referred to as "remedial" or "developmental." Remedial programs and courses generally are designed to correct deficiencies in basic knowledge or skills; developmental programs are designed to strengthen self-image and confidence as well as to correct deficiencies. The two terms, however, will be used interchangeably in this article.

Suggested Readings

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