AN ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES CRITICAL FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Carolyn Gaughan Sizemore
Marshall University
Graduate School of Education
and Professional Development

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Committee Chair, Dennis M. Anderson, Ed.D.
Frances Simone, Ph.D.
Louis K.Watts, Ed.D.
Shirley M. Davis, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

An Analysis of Institutional Policies and Practices Critical for Effective Leadership in
Developmental Education Programs

Carolyn Gaughan Sizemore

The purpose of this study was to identify the most critical institutional policies and practices deemed essential for the effective development and governance of systemic, effective developmental education programs in community colleges through the perspective of community college administrators. This study ranked community college leaders' ratings of what policies and practices should be implemented to improve developmental education programs. Expert opinion by the participating developmental education administrators and college presidents were compared and ranked to identify priorities for change. The results could serve as guidelines for the improvement of developmental education programs for student success in community colleges.
This non-experimental, comparative research study was designed to rate the importance of identified key descriptors in three critical components of an effective developmental education program. The components studied were organization and administration, program components and instructional practices. The instrument used to collect data was the survey designed by Hunter R. Boylan for *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education* (Boylan, 2002, 107 – 110). The inventory found in Boylan's book (2002) was modified with author's approval to match the educational purpose and target population of this study. A pilot study was first conducted with West Virginia developmental education practitioners to field test the survey. The target population consisted of two categories of community college administrators in the Metro West Virginia geographic area. The first group was identified as developmental education administrators, and the second group was identified as presidents of their respective community colleges. Each participant was given a pre-survey questionnaire which solicited demographic data about job titles, years of experience in higher education administration and a self-rating of interest and knowledge in the field of developmental education before administration of the online survey. After analysis of the data, several conclusions were determined. The most powerful conclusion that was reiterated throughout the results of this study was that the top priority for program improvement in developmental education reached by consensus of both community college presidents and developmental education administrators is in the area of Organization and Administration (Component 1). The next priority was found in the area of Program Components (Component 2). Both community college presidents and developmental education administrators perceived Instructional Practices (Component 3) the least critical category of need. Although there was a significant difference between the ratings of developmental education administrators and college presidents for Component 1and Component 2, the importance of developmental education reorganization and administration has been determined by the results of this study to be an institutional priority for program improvement.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Developmental education courses support academic and personal preparedness needs of traditional and nontraditional students identified through low test scores on college placement assessment tests (Saxon, Sullivan, Boylan, & Forrest, 2005). A 2010 policy framework released by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the Lumina Foundation makes the case that developmental education should be a key component of state strategies to increase college attainment in community colleges because 42 million adults between the ages of 18 and 64 in our nation do not have the skills necessary to attain a college degree. The seminal study by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2003 reported 42 percent of high school graduates enter college with low placement test scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). According to this study, developmental education should continue to be provided in 100 percent of community colleges and possibly increase from the reported 80 percent of public four-year colleges and 60 percent of private four-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Boylan, 2002; McCabe, 2003). Later studies by Clery (2008) and Greene (2008) further noted little change in these figures. These studies predicted that the number of students academically underprepared for college will continue to increase in community colleges with greater emphasis on performance standards. According to the ECS study (2010), effective institutional policies remain an important and necessary solution to ensure that students complete developmental education as quickly and effectively as possible.

There is a plethora of evidence over the past 30 years in the professional literature about the important driving mission of serving underprepared students in community colleges. Open access to higher education mandates that community colleges offer developmental courses to provide opportunity for college students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to successfully complete college-level courses (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, & Davis, 2007; Perkhounkova, Noble & Sawyer, 2006). Studies by Boylan (2002; 2008) have helped spur recent developmental education initiatives for program reform with more than $100 million in private funding from both the Lumina Foundation for Education (2008) and the Developmental Education Initiative (2009) funded by Bill and Melinda Gates' foundation. These initiatives have focused on the need for research to identify and develop effective programs that address academic barriers to successful completion of college studies and ultimately degrees.

These studies have characterized the current state of developmental education as ineffective and in need for research to drive change. According to Boylan (2008), developmental education continues to fall short on its mission to provide a critical bridge for underprepared students by systematically ignoring research findings. McDonald and Bernado (2005) cautioned that ineffective developmental education programs could seriously marginalize already disadvantaged students by closing the door on opportunities to enroll in credit-bearing courses. Common ineffective practices cited are overreliance on adjunct instructors, poorly designed curriculum and marginal operational budgets. These findings have been verified by studies conducted by the NCES (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan & Davis, 2007) and ECS (2010).

Recent studies on developmental education have focused on program effectiveness (ECS, 2010; Haithcock, Weinstein, Boylan, & Saxon, 2010). To be considered effective, Saxon and Boylan (2002) specified that developmental programs should enable students to complete the required remedial courses within a reasonable period of time, to successfully pass subsequent college-level courses in the same or similar subject areas and to achieve Grade Point Averages (GPAs) comparable to students who were not required to participate in developmental studies. Hill (2004) contended that administrators need to strategically coordinate curriculum design, instruction, and support services required for developmental education to reflect the uniqueness and culture of the entire institution, and to ensure the appropriateness of the program for both the students and the college.

The national debate over developmental education has shifted over the past decade from the controversy over justification to exist in colleges and universities to whether or not developmental education has been held accountable for the educational benefits it has claimed to provide its participants (Perkhounkova, Noble & Sawyer, 2006). The research evidence available is generally too limited, suffers from design flaws or is based on inadequate samples (White & Harrison, 2007). Until this issue is resolved, developmental education will continue to remain a target of concern for policymakers and stakeholders (Bell & Perez, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The goal of this study was to evaluate institutional policies and best practices to determine the most critical needs for the improvement of developmental education programs. Existing research findings on developmental education programs has tended to

focus singularly on their overall effectiveness in order to justify their existence in higher education rather than on how to improve current programs (Boylan, 2002; McCabe, 2003). The literature is replete with data supporting the need to identify critical and effective institutional policies and model practices to maximize the systemic effectiveness of developmental education (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2008; Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2011.) Although Boylan (2002), McCabe (2000; 2003) and Roueche and Roueche (1999) have identified the common best practices used by practitioners in selected developmental programs, there remained a void in the professional literature from an administrative perspective for designing or revising institutional policies and best practices in developmental education to improve program effectiveness (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan & Davis, 2007; Haithcock, Weinstein, Boylan & Saxon, 2010).

Developmental researchers and practitioners at the National Conference on Research in Developmental Education (Duranczyk & Higbee, 2006; Haithcock, Weinstein, Boylan & Saxon, 2010) called for policy analysis research to study the dichotomy between policies and practices operationalized in developmental education. Participants identified seven overall research themes in their proposal for a research agenda to guide scholars to improve the field of developmental education:

> The seven themes identified include (1) professional developmental and faculty status, (2) assessment, (3) affective factors and student characteristics, (4) best practices, (5) improved curriculum, (6) technology, and (7) developmental education research (pp. 1-3).

A critical review of the literature identified the lack of empirical studies needed for consensus building of the critical institutional policies and practices that college administrators have concurred as effective in program improvement (Haithcock, Weinstein, Boylan, & Saxon, 2010). Without this consensus of policy decisions, the majority of developmental programs remain at risk of systemic failure and insufficient public accountability for performance.

Research Questions

Although the body of research in developmental education has expanded greatly over the past 30 years, there continues to be a national calling for research-based innovative strategies and policies for school reform in the field of developmental education (Lumina Foundation, 2008; Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2011). Institutional leaders need to work with states to identify and implement model policies and practices to improve student performance (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2011). For too long, developmental education programs have been offering courses for academically at-risk students with little oversight and accountability for their effectiveness to overcome barriers to learning (Lesley, 2001). Therefore, a critical need has existed for institutional leaders to analyze institutional policies and practices to build consensus to enhance informed decision-making for effective developmental education programs (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2008).

For this research study, developmental education administrators and college presidents were asked to rate 33 descriptors to determine the most critical institutional policies and best practices to improve developmental education programs in community colleges. To determine the priorities for program improvement, community college

developmental education administrators and college presidents from Metro West Virginia community colleges from the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia were surveyed and asked to rate identified best policies and practices for developmental education in the component areas of organization and administration, program components and instructional practices. The following central research questions guided this study:

1.   What is the relative importance of each of the 9 identified descriptors for the category of organization and administration on the effectiveness of the developmental education program as rated by community college administrators and presidents?

2.   What is the relative importance of each of the 12 identified descriptors for the category of program components on the effectiveness of the developmental education program as rated by community college administrators and presidents?

3.   What is the relative importance of each of the 12 identified descriptors for the category of instructional practices on the effectiveness of the developmental education program as rated by college administrators and presidents?

4.   Is there a significant difference between the ratings assigned by college presidents compared with those assigned by developmental education administrators in the identification of effective institutional policies and best practices?

5.   Is there a significant difference between the perceived importance of the three components as measured by the grand mean of the descriptor means in each component group?

6.   Is the relative importance of the three components related to the title (group) of the participants doing the rating?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the most critical institutional policies and practices deemed essential for the effective development and governance of systemic, effective developmental education programs in community colleges through the perspective of community college administrators. This study ranked community college leaders' ratings of what particular policies and practices should be implemented to improve developmental education programs. Expert opinion by the participating developmental education administrators and college presidents was compared and ranked to identify priorities for change. The results could serve as guidelines for the development of more effective developmental education programs for student success in community colleges.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions of terms provide clarity:

Best Practices: Refers to critical organizational, administrative and instructional policies or strategies which are essential to guide effective developmental programs.

Developmental Education: According to the National Association for Developmental Education (2009), developmental education is a comprehensive process which focuses on the intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development of all students. Developmental education includes, but is not limited to, tutoring, personal and career counseling, academic advising, and coursework.

Developmental Education Administrator: The community college official responsible for the planning, assessment and budgeting of developmental education. To distinguish

between the administrator and the practitioner, the developmental administrators selected as participants should not teach more than 6 hours of developmental courses per semester.

Developmental Education Students: Individuals who are distinguished by academic underpreparedness determined by low college placement scores or low high school GPAs, as well as other affective traits correlated to college success categorized by anxiety, poor study strategies, lack of self-confidence, poor note-taking, not attending class and fear of failure.

Institutional Policies: The set of rules for actions, services and concepts which often require a commitment of money and resources imposed by decision makers at the community colleges made on the basis of objective information, shared values and research evidence used to draw implications for principles and practice.

Metro West Virginia: The reduced fee public community colleges located in counties who border West Virginia and those who border another county that is adjacent to the state of West Virginia as recognized by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

Noncompleters: Students who qualify for developmental courses yet fail to successfully complete them.

TRPP Model: The theoretical perspective which holds promise for unifying developmental practitioners. The Casazza and Silverman theory (1996) has been constructed to integrate theory and practice for a new model of practice (TRPP) through the successful merger of one theoretical framework for of the following areas: (a) theory, (b) research (c) practice, and (d) principles.

Significance of the Study

Meeting the needs of a tidal wave of underprepared, nontraditional and underrepresented populations of students continues to be one of the most pressing and unresolved issues in community college administration (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2008; Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2011). Despite a rich history of serving underprepared students, there have been too few empirical studies on effective policies to build a consensus among experts to guide administrators in designing effective developmental education programs (Saxon & Boylan, 2003; Weissman, Silk, & Bulakowski, 1997). In general, there remains a need to better understand the role of administrators in effective developmental education programs (Boylan, 2002). To begin with, administrators have been responsible for justifying the costs of remediation with measures of institutional productivity or "risk losing federal funding" (Roueche & Roueche, 1999, p. 45). In addition, developmental programs have been ineffective when they have been characterized as uncoordinated, nonsystematic units apart from the institutional planning efforts (Boylan, 2002; Hill, 2004). Student potential may become marginalized if institutional policies present barriers to college persistence and success (McDonald & Bernado, 2005; Duranczyk & Higbee, 2006). Because of the important leadership role that community college administrators hold in the field of developmental education, the primary significance of this study has been to build a consensus of the critical institutional policies and best practices needed for administrators to implement for effective developmental education programs in our community colleges.

Limitations of the Study

The implications of this study must be considered in light of the following limitations:

1. The small sample size of the population limits the study's generalizability.

2. Nonprobability samples do not involve random selection and are generally less desirable than probability samples.

3. The findings of this study are limited to public community colleges in the Metro West Virginia geographical service region.

4. Although numerical ratings are provided in the survey, they are only rough estimates.

Delimitations of the Study

The implications of this study must be considered in light of the following delimitations:

1. Many community colleges have institutional policies which allow or require administrators to teach courses in addition to their major job duties. For this study, developmental education administrators may not teach more than six hours of developmental courses per semester to be eligible to participate in this study.

2. Developmental education practitioners who retain the primary classification of instructors or professors and teach more than six semester hours have been excluded from the purposive sample.

Theoretical Framework

This study has addressed theoretical insights of developmental education through the lens of community college leaders' perceptions of program improvement. One crucial question raised by Brothen and Wambach (2004) and Hill (2000) is how the leaders will

integrate theory with practice in order to improve these programs. To address this issue, the research foundation of this study was a combination of two theoretical models.

Kotter's Change Model

One transformational change theory model used by management to provide a theoretical framework of organizational change is Kotter's theory (1995). John Kotter's change model has identified eight critical steps for transformational change. These eight steps are as follows: (a) establish a sense of urgency, (b) form a powerful guiding coalition, (c) create a vision, (d) communicate the change vision, (e) empower others for broad-based action on the vision, (f) plan to create short-term wins, (g) consolidate improvements and produce still more change, and (h) institutionalize new approaches (Cech, 2010; Kotter, 1995). Developmental education reform through a comprehensive, systematic and informed process of program and policy development holds promise for organizational change through informed decision-making (Bailey, 2009). Therefore, community college administrators should reexamine current practices through informed urgency, vision and action in order to build the theoretical framework to guide needed programmatic reform.

TRPP Model: Theory, Research, Principles and Practice

One theoretical framework which holds promise for unifying developmental administrators is Casazza and Silverman's TRPP Model (1996). The model refers to the integration of the four components of theory, research, principles and practice. This framework was constructed to integrate sound principles of theory and research, to maximize desired outcomes and address the challenge for program improvement due to a lack of a unifying theory in the field of developmental education (1996). To guide

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