Developmental Education at a Tipping Point

[Add more math/reading references. Mention Uri.]

I want to start with this observation: the work we do—those of us who work in developmental education—the work we do is important. Of course, lots of important work goes on in higher education. We produce astronauts and engineers, poets and nurses, and even lawyers. But if you place a priority

* on the American dream
* on the democratic ideal that everyone in this country should have a chance to succeed,
* on the idea that anyone willing to work hard can improve their state in life,
* on the idea that we want to close the increasingly large gap between the rich and everyone else, and
* on the idea that the country needs and will need many more educated workers,

If you place a priority on these kinds of issues, then the most important work we do in higher education is developmental education. It’s of crucial importance to our students and to our society because it makes it possible for students who have not done well in education to have a second chance, a chance at the American Dream, a chance to end generational poverty for their families.

But of course, here I am preaching to the choir. The people in this room have recognized the importance of our work and have been laboring under frequently debilitating conditions—class sizes that are too large, teaching loads that are too heavy, and too many faculty whose part-time status makes it necessary that they commute among two or three schools to make a living—but despite these conditions, we have continued to work because we are part of what Uri Treisman calls this “joyful conspiracy.”

Now a little history.

In 1970 at City College in the CUNY system in New York, under pressure from large scale demonstrations and even the burning of a building, open admissions was born. And almost immediately CUNY started offering developmental courses.

However, from the beginning there was an undercurrent of opposition to both open admissions and developmental education. The naysayers announced that

1. These students won’t be able to “do” college.
2. They will drag down CUNY’s standards.
3. They will be harmful to the school’s reputation.
4. We shouldn’t pay for the same education twice.
5. Everyone doesn’t need to go to college.
6. We need an *uneducated* work force to do the labor of industry.

Despite the presence of these voices of opposition, open admissions and developmental education grew rapidly both at CUNY and throughout the country. Public universities began to brag, not about the high SAT scores of their students, but about the degree of diversity they had achieved. By the year 2000, developmental education had reached its apogee.

And then, things began to change. The first sign of this change, ironically, occurred at the birthplace of developmental education: at CUNY. Faced with budget cuts and political pressure from Mayor Giuliani, the CUNY system decided in 2000 that students who needed developmental education would not be admitted to the universities, but would be sent to the community colleges.

Once again, CUNY’s decision had a snowball effect across the country. In some states, legislation was passed prohibiting universities from offering developmental education or barring students needing developmental education from universities. In other states, many four-year schools simply raised their admissions standards to the point that they were no longer admitting developmental students.

The result was that today, the bulk of developmental education takes place at community colleges. Why we in higher education made this decision is somewhat of a mystery to me. I’ve sometimes heard it argued that we moved developmental education to the community colleges to save money, and I’ve heard it argued that developmental education, in some existential sense, simply doesn't “belong” at the university. I have not heard it argued that moving developmental education to the community colleges would improve the success rates of the students involved.

Let me point out a couple of reasons why, in fact, this change may have had just the opposite effect on students—making it less likely that they will succeed.

1. Barring these students from universities will exacerbate their self-doubt. It will increase their fear that they are not “college material.”
2. For students whose goal is a baccalaureate degree, requiring that they first attend a community college makes it more likely they will drop out of the pipeline, which now includes transferring institutions with all the complications inherent in that process.
3. When developmental education was located at universities, many scholars there made it their research focus. Most of the early studies of developmental education were conducted by university faculty. Remember David Bartholomea, Andrea Lunsford, Mike Rose, Peter Elbow, and Lynn Troyka? Only Troyka taught at a community college. Now that few developmental students attend universities, the faculty there have little opportunity to teach or research developmental education. And community college faculty, with their heavy teaching loads, have little opportunity to do research.
4. Most serious has been the effect on graduate education. In many graduate programs in English, math, or reading, the grad students will never meet a developmental student, because too often developmental students are barred from attending universities.

There are steps that could be taken to reduce these problems, but so far these steps have not occurred:

1. Community colleges could designated a few faculty positions as designed to allow scholarship, especially in the area of developmental education.
2. University writing programs could encourage their faculty to do scholarship on developmental education at the community colleges.
3. Graduate programs could include courses on teaching developmental education.
4. Graduate programs could require internships at local community colleges.

What I’ve been describing was the state of developmental education ten or more years ago. The responsibility for developmental education, which in the 70s and 80s had extended throughout higher ed except for the most elite of schools, now had shrunk, for the most part, to the community colleges.

But in the last ten years, the threat to developmental education has become even greater. On the one hand, a series of researchers at places like the Community College Research Center, MDRC, Jobs for the Future, and Achieving the Dream, have produced a series of studies that demonstrated convincingly to most of us—despite disagreement over some of the details—that what we had worked so hard at for years was not nearly as successful as we had hoped. Looking at extremely large data sets—256,000 students in 56 ATD colleges in one study, all the developmental students in Florida in another, CCRC and other researchers pointed out that, of a cohort of students placed in developmental courses, only about a third will ever pass the credit course for which they are being “developed,” and an even smaller fraction will ever complete a degree or even a certificate.

On the other hand, state and local governments have been, since 2007, experiencing some of the most severe budget shortfalls in recent memory.

The combination of disappointing results and very tight budgets has given new prominence to the voices of opposition. Once again, we are hearing it said that we “shouldn’t pay for the same education twice,” that “these students don’t belong in college,” “everyone doesn’t need to go to college,” and that the presence of developmental students is causing us to “lower standards.” When President Obama proposed making two years at a community college tuition free, a number of pundits raised questions about whether letting more students into higher education was a good idea. David Brooks wrote, “The smart thing to do would be to scrap the Obama tuition plan. Students who go to community college free now have tragically high dropout rates.” Brooks even singles out dev ed as a major part of the problem: “You’d [need to] figure out the remedial education mess. Half of all community-college students arrive unprepared for college work. Remedial courses are supposed to bring them up to speed, but it’s not clear they work, so some states are dropping remediation, which could leave even more students at sea.”

All this is fairly depressing. However, there are other developments occurring today that may provide hope to those of us who believe in our students and want to see them succeed.

In the last decade, for better or for worse, there has been more attention paid to developmental education than at any time in its history. Foundations like Gates, Lumina, Hewlett, and Kresge have funded new developments. The federal government, under the TAACCCT grants, has made additional funding available.

Organizations like ATD, JFF, MDRC, the League for Innovation, and CCA are focusing much of their attention on developmental education.

And finally, our state governments are joining the mix. In state after state, Commissioners of Higher Ed, Boards of Regents, Coordinating Boards, and even state legislatures are turning their attention to developmental education.

I want to examine the best known of these legislative interventions in some detail.

Connecticut. About a year and a half ago, *Inside Higher Education* ran a headline announcing that a bill had been introduced in the Connecticut legislature to abolish developmental education. I called a friend of mine who is a college president in Connecticut and asked what was going on. She replied, “Peter, you’re not going to believe this, but Senator Beth Bye, who sponsored the bill, went to a talk you gave in Austin, TX, and she thinks she’s doing what you suggested.”

And actually, she was . . . sort of. Under the bill that finally passed, PA 12-40, colleges in Connecticut are required to place developmental students at the upper end of the range directly into credit courses and then, through “embedded support” for additional hours each week, to provide the support needed for them to succeed in the credit course. In other words what Senator Bye meant by “abolishing developmental education” was simply changing it into a co-requisite model, of which ALP is one example.

For students whose skills indicate they would not be successful under this model, the situation is a little murkier. Schools are required to offer “intensive one-semester” courses to allow them to become eligible for the imbedded or pre-requisite experience. This part of the legislation and Board of Regents policy has been the center of most controversy, and some of the issues are not yet resolved.

In fact, it is for these lower-performing developmental students that, in my opinion, all of us have the most work to do. In some places, schools are establishing a “floor” below which students cannot attempt even developmental courses. Sometimes they are referred to Adult Basic Education where they are ineligible for financial aid and where we have simply lengthened the pipeline making it less likely they will succeed. I worry that pressures to improve completion rates will make the “floor” option increasingly appealing to institutions.

However, I would like to focus on the response of the Connecticut faculty to the portion of PA 12-40 that mandated admitting higher performing developmental students to credit English and providing “embedded support.”

The form of that support is up to individual schools to determine. Last year, I worked with a group of six colleges that had chosen to adopt the ALP model. After a period of understandable concern about the process of having a mandate from the legislature determining how these professionals do their jobs, the faculty grudgingly accepted the idea and went to work designing their version of acceleration which is producing dramatically improved results. I was just in Connecticut a few months ago working with a group of these faculty, who now, a year and a half later, are able to say that the kinds of innovation in developmental education taking place in Connecticut today would never have happened without the “bombshell” of PA 12-40. And Senator Bye herself has said that she had tried for a number of years through hearings and meetings to encourage higher ed to improve developmental education with absolutely no effect.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that it is a good thing for state legislatures to pass laws like the Connecticut law, but I am, with considerable reluctance, admitting that the inertia that too often exists in colleges and universities sometimes makes it difficult for us to innovate and can make some form of top down mandate like legislative intervention almost inevitable.

Let’s take a quick look at Colorado. Two years ago, Lt Governor Joe Garcia, a former community college president himself, was about to introduce legislation to overhaul developmental education in the state. A statewide committee, led by Geri Anderson and Casey Sacks, met with him and asked for a year to develop a faculty-sponsored plan. He agreed to their request, and after a year of intense work by several state-wide faculty committees, a plan for redesign was announced that is drawing favorable reviews across the country.

And now to Florida, where considerable work has been going on to enact the Common Core Curriculum in K through 12. That work is just reaching its conclusion this year. With this reform in mind, the Florida legislature in May 2013 passed and the governor signed SB1720, which mandates that no student who has graduated from a Florida high school since 2007 can be required to be assessed by a college, and if they *voluntarily* are assessed, they cannot be *required* to take any developmental courses.

The thinking behind this bill seems to be that “we fixed K through 12, so students should no longer need developmental courses.”

I bring this up because it represents a separate threat to developmental education. Even Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan seems to embrace this idea. He has repeatedly been quoted as saying he intends to put community colleges out of the remedial education business by reforming K through 12.

Now I agree that it would be a far better solution if all students coming to college were ready for college. But remember that the average age of community college students is about 28; it’s been a decade since they were in high school. Their reading, writing, and math skills may have been “college ready” when they graduated, but may have atrophied in the intervening decade.

Sometimes it is even suggested that we should do away with developmental education and use the money we save to “fix” the high schools.

This is a dangerous proposal. First, it assumes that the money saved would end up in the budgets of public schools. Second, it assumes, despite disappointing results from many earlier reform efforts, that this time we can solve all the problems of K through 12. And finally, it writes off a generation of students who are graduating from our current schools—we know many of them are not college ready, but under these proposals, we’ll end support for this generation of developmental students on the hope that we will benefit the next generation.

So what are we to do?

There is much that we are already doing. Several approaches are being adopted with the goal of reducing the number of students who need developmental education, approaches like

* + K-20 alignment
  + dual enrollment
  + early assessment and intervention
  + summer bridge

Contextualizing developmental education is showing great promise in programs like these:

* I-BEST
* learning communities

A number of schools are supplementing developmental education with the following:

* student success courses
* supplemental instruction
* tutoring

The various forms of acceleration have shown success:

* compressed courses
* aligning developmental education with credit courses as in Statway and Quantway
* reducing the number of levels of developmental education courses
* co-requisite courses

We need to accumulate data on how well each of these work, including how well they work in a variety of different contexts. In addition, as these approaches are adopted, schools will necessarily modify them; we need data on whether these modifications improve their effectiveness or reduce it.

And we need to increase the urgency with which we scale up the innovations that are established as successful. Scaling up is not a simple process. It is more complicated than just adding more sections at one college or more colleges in a state. It has to involve deeper and more committed support from a wide range of stakeholders. It has to involve professional development. It has to involve permanent changes to policy, to procedures, to classrooms, and It has to involve abandoning approaches that don’t work.

There are organizations that share our goal of improving the success rates of developmental students—organizations like Complete College America, the Gates Foundation, even our state governments. Even though we sometimes disagree with the procedures or the specifics suggested—sometimes even mandated—by these organizations, I am arguing that it is a wiser strategy to work with them to shape the processes and the specifics of the innovations they are urging. Just digging in our heals and resisting will simply make it easier for those who want to abolish developmental education.

[Add something on scaling up.]

There is much work to be done, and much of it is being done by the people in this room. For the sake of our students, but also for the sake of our democratic society, we must succeed. And time is short. If we don’t succeed in redesigning developmental education so that it makes it possible for many more students to succeed in college in the next five years or so, I fear the political will to continue supporting this important, this crucial work may disappear. I urge you to dedicate yourself anew to this “joyful conspiracy.”