Working Paper

Developmental Students: Their Heterogeneity and Readiness

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Abstract:

Of course students are crucial participants in the classroom, one of the central elements in the "triangle of instruction" consisting of the instructor, the student, and the content. In this working paper, we examine the roles of students in the developmental classroom based on the comments of instructors and on our observations of classrooms

While most instructors have enormous sympathy for their students, they also hold a number of pejorative views of students — particularly that they are "not ready to be college students". Some of them, in response, rely on remedial pedagogy, or dumb down their classes. But others treat students' lack of readiness as a challenge for instructors and colleges. Indeed, one interpretation of Student Success courses and other student services is that they are ways of teaching how to be successful students, rather than leaving that to accident.

When one observes many developmental classrooms, the most striking aspect is the heterogeneity of students. Some are "brush-up" students, who simply need to remember skills they have already learned. Some have been misplaced by placement exams, and similarly need very little additional instruction. Many — almost surely the majority — have failed to learn certain academic skills in many years of K-12 education, for reasons that are hotly debated. Others have learning disabilities or mental health issues, and colleges have no ways of either diagnosing or treating such conditions. The result is that the developmental classroom contains many students with different needs, while the instructor has only varying instructional approaches to offer.

While it may seem that community colleges are already highly differentiated, this Working Paper implicitly argues that they need to be further differentiated to respond to the variety of students and the enormous differences in their needs. The conclusion provides a number of suggestions for further differentiating colleges in order to serve all the needs of their enormously varied students.

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In two earlier papers we focused on the actions of faculty in the classroom, emphasizing the dominance of remedial pedagogy in basic skills classes, as well as the amount of innovation in many colleges. But of course students are crucial participants in the classroom, one of the elements in the "triangle of instruction" consisting of the instructor, the student, and the content. In this working paper, therefore, we examine the roles of students in the developmental classroom based on the comments of instructors about students (in section I) and on our observations of classrooms (particularly in section II).

What is most striking about the students in community colleges is how varied they are. Some could have attended various four-year colleges, but chose not to for reasons ranging from family responsibilities to finances; others have barely managed to obtain their high school diplomas. The largest number of students is of conventional college-going age, say from 18 to 24, but a substantial number in virtually every college are older students, returning to schooling for a

variety of reasons. Some students have clear plans, but many are "experimenters", using the college as a low-cost and convenient way to try college and see whether they can find a sustaining interest. But what really counts for our purposes are the learning needs of different students, and these prove to be just as varied. In section I we describe five types of students who co-exist in the basic skills classroom, each of which has a different learning issue but all of whom are in the same classroom — complicating the job of the instructor enormously.

For this chapter we rely heavily on instructors' perceptions of students — which is appropriate since such perceptions may affect their expectations of students and their approaches to instruction. Instructors have enormous sympathy for their students, and understand all too well the pressures in their lives, the competing demands of family and employment, the "busied up" conditions of their schedules. But at the same time they also perceive many developmental students to lack the preparation necessary for college — the common phrase is that "they're not ready to be college students". And indeed there is some truth to that — based on classroom observations — since many students do not behave like the stereotype of committed college students; they arrive late to class, spend time on cells phones and computers, fail to complete homework. But here there is a problem of causality: do they behave this way because they somehow have not learned to behave in any other way, or are they responding to the fact that their developmental classes are so conventional, so

dominated by the drill and repetition of remedial pedagogy? In classes with more student participation and interaction, such distracted behavior is much less common. So the dominance of remedial pedagogy may be responsible for a great deal of unmotivated behavior.

But whether this is true or not, the crucial question is how instructors, and colleges themselves, respond to the perception that students "are not ready to be college students". Many individual instructors, as well as colleges that provide student support services (especially courses like "College Success"), are doing what they can to teach developmental students "how to be college students", rather than assuming that their behavior is inherently unengaged. So this too is a dimension of developmental education, teaching students not only the basic and other academic skills they will need for college-level courses, but instilling the behaviors that will make them successful in subsequent education.

I. Faculty Conceptions of Students:

"They're Not Ready to be College Students"

A crucial component of any instruction is the way instructors view and treat their students. A commonplace about teaching is that instructors need to know their students well, particularly in student-centered teaching where instructors draw on the background and experiences of students, acknowledging their strengths while shoring up their weaknesses. Some instructional

approaches are essentially specific ways of knowing students well; for example, culturally-relevant pedagogy insists that teachers must know about the cultural norms and practices in their students' communities — often interpreted as communities of color or, in ways we will illustrate below, working-class communities. Sometimes the advice to be knowledgeable about and respectful of students becomes exaggerated as the only dimension of teaching that matters. This perspective emerges, for example, in the notions of "student support" as a conception of teaching, in the idea of "caring" as the basis of pedagogy, or in the "therapist" approach to teaching (Grubb et al. 1999, 36 – 38). But, even short of such extreme statements, the notion of respecting students, empathizing with the conditions of their lives, and supporting them psychologically as well as cognitively is widely considered a crucial dimension of instruction.

As we emphasized in Working Paper 2, instruction in basic skills classes is almost invariably supportive, with teachers praising students for participation and answers while avoiding the demeaning treatment one often sees in high schools. The only real exception was a math department in one urban college, where the student development staff complained about the math department: "We had student protests over the math department. They're not very good teachers, and they don't like our students. They are dismissive of them." But this example was noteworthy precisely because it was such an exception; for the most part, even the most rigid, lecture-oriented, instructors using remedial pedagogies treated their students with respect.

In addition, most instructors are quite knowledgeable about the enormous variety of community college students, and the kinds of lives they lead. Here's one full-time math instructor, an individual in a college known for its innovation who has taught at several levels of the education system, responding to a question about students:

> Oh my God, they're all over the place. On the extremes, they vary from your bottom four students in a basic math class who have absolutely no concept of what anything means. Sometimes it's learning disabilities, sometimes there are students here who honestly have marginal IQs. . . and then on the other side of it our top students, they could be functioning at Berkeley and just as successful as they are here. They generally were not successful in math before, but they really want to learn and they'd like to get through it this time But they're very responsive, as opposed to junior high kids, let's say. . . Single mothers with three kids working 40 hours a week and trying to come to school. I had a guy who would come directly from his night shift directly to the 8:00 class. . . so you know — work, kids, illness, mental problems. And the occasional one who just, you know, "Hi, I'm here, fine, great, did well, see you." They're the ones who just go through it no problem at all, too — they're just reviewing. There's everybody, you know?

So in the span of a few minutes he has identified the variation in performance, the issues of family and work responsibilities, and what we call "brush-up" students — "they assess into elementary algebra just because they haven't seen it for a long time, but their skills are fine", which several instructors said might be about 10% of basic skills students. This instructor has also introduced, along the way, the problems of learning disabilities and more pervasive developmental delays ("marginal IQs") that we will examine in a subsequent section.

By and large, instructors accept the enormous variety of students they have; as one informed her president,

> Teaching college is like being in Vegas. If you get a hand of cards, if you don't like them, you can't say, "Gee, can you take them back and give me some better " I can't look at my students and say "Wow, you're unprepared, so I'm going to send you over there and I want better students.". . . I like my students. I think my job is the best job ever.

Another dean of student development used a similar card-playing metaphor: she acknowledged the difficulty of

> getting the faculty to acknowledge that we have students coming to us who are unprepared to go on to do collegiate work. . . It's almost like denial at time: "We're a college and this shouldn't be". Well, the reality is society has dealt us a different hand and we have a responsibility now; we're in a situation where we can do some things. And I think more and more the faculty are embracing that idea — that we can do some things.

Furthermore, she credited a series of basic skills symposia supported by the state's Basic Skills Initiative, bringing together faculty from all disciplines to describe their students, "and that makes them more aware that they, too, are basic skills faculty. Not all of them are willing to buy into that, but more and more are." We note that when colleges create induction programs for new faculty or adjuncts, they often include a course or module about community college students, to be sure that everyone understands the enormous variation. There are of course exceptions, like the math department noted above, described as being "dismissive" of students. In another college, an English instructor and co-chair of basic skills said,

> There are some [faculty] that we have students that don't have college skills, and what are they [unskilled students] doing here? And even why are we teaching them? So we try to — when I say "we", the counselors and those of us [instructors] who care deeply — together try to protect them a little bit and in the beginning while they are building their skills,

> get them into classes with instructors who do care and who aren't going to just dismiss them for their skill level.

In several colleges, there was a similar coterie of faculty — anywhere from 5 to a dozen — who were highly committed to basic skills and who "care deeply trying to protect students", while other faculty in the same departments were more ambivalent. But by and large the faculty we observed and interviewed understood and respected the enormous variety of students they taught.

At the same time, instructors make many statements about students that are quite pejorative, and it's worrisome to think that these negative perceptions of students might influence their teaching. Their comments about students and their deficiencies run the gamut, from comments about inadequate academic skills to observations about their work habits to statements about their lack of potential. One instructor, a full-timer who had been teaching for 15 years with a background in GED instruction,[i] seemed particularly frustrated with his students. In an interview standing outside the classroom, he called the work of his students "shit", and felt that their time was better spent on in-class practice rather than on developing new approaches. During his career he has had to "adapt to reality and "lower his standards" because of the low reading levels of his students; he wanted to use more advanced authors like Sandra Cisneros, but selected an easier work (*Miguel Street* by V.S. Naipaul) because of their reading levels. He also asserted that students lack cultural literacy, or general knowledge of high culture, and that this eroded academic literacy; he suggested that the

college sponsor trips to museums (including the nearby Getty Museum) as a remedy. However, despite his disparaging comments about student skills, his classroom behavior showed evident concern for students, and they seemed quite responsive to his approach.

Many other instructors complained about preparation in high schools, noting that it was possible to avoid writing-intensive courses in junior and senior year, that the emphasis on fiction in conventional literature classes did not prepare students well for the non-fiction stressed in college, and that students passing the California exit exam* — which most observers think is geared to the eighth or ninth grade level ("the bar's just set too low") — thought they were well-prepared for college. As one instructor in a middle-class college noted, "there's a disconnect in that 98 or 99 percent of the students graduate with the high school exit exam. They wing it. They come here, and we have 85% of them, they can't get through our placement test." This was one of the few colleges in our sample to work consistently with high school teachers, and another instructor noted the disjunction: "The high school teachers were concerned that they thought their students were doing well, but then they come take our placement test and place below college level."

Of course basic skills instructor complain about students' academic competencies: low levels of these skills are what have gotten them into basic

* Students in California must pass an exit exam — the CAHSEE — before then can graduate from high school.

skills classes. But just as important as academic skills, many instructors noted the life circumstances that prevent their students from being "ready to be college students". Some of the dimension of being "not ready" come from the conditions of their lives, with "work, kids":

> We find at the 97 and 99 level [the lowest level courses] that students often lead more chaotic lives than students in 101 and 102 . . . I have a student who's very motivated but his mother's in jail and he's having to look after his brother who has mental health problems — and work and go to college.

Another commented, using the same language of chaos, that

> I also believe that we have a group of students that have the desire, but they're in crisis or chaos mode. And with that comes, "I want to but I don't know how." And we need to have programs that really work to re-open their possibilities. . . I would love for student services and the Academic Success Center to come together and create that model.

This is, of course, a reference to the need for student support services, the subject of Working Paper 4, but most student services provide academic support, not the support for the personal crises and chaos that come from the confluence of family, work, and schooling, or from child care needs or employment and money pressures or transportation needs, or from mental health issues. So even the college with the best student support — Chaffey College, profiled in Working Paper 5 — cannot readily cope with such personal issues. Similarly, one college surveyed its students to find out what they needed to be successful; the most common mention was an academic mentor, but the second was gas cards so they could afford gas to get to class — but of course the college had no way to respond to this need. More generally, three separate studies based on interviews

with students have found that the distractions of work and family life are the most powerful reasons that students leave community colleges,[ii] so it's not surprising that this overload, the "busied-up conditions of students' lives", often prevents them from paying full attention to their basic skills classes.

But a less obvious and more difficult aspect of students is their apparent lack of understanding of what "college" requires — including planfulness, commitment to schooling, independence, initiative, and academic stamina or "grit" (Duckworth et al. 2007). One vice president for student services mused about what we call basic skills:

> How do you define "basic skills"? I see lots of our students who need basic responsibility, interpersonal skills — almost everything. So it's not just reading and writing or math. According to many of the nationwide surveys the employer pay attention to the interpersonal skills, relationship skills, and communication skills. So I feel a high proportion of our students are really in need of enhancing that part.

Planning is another dimension of these kinds of "basic skills": One chair of a Learning Assistance Center stated that "We have a set of students that may not ever see a counselor, and they just start taking courses." Many others complained that many students "don't know what they're here for", and that without clear plans they cannot formulate a coherent program of study, or understand the role of basic skills courses in their educational trajectory. In part this is a complaint that the students sometimes called "experimenters" — those who come to college to find out what they might want to do in their adult lives, since career-oriented guidance and counseling in high school is so poor[iii] — are not particularly ready

to learn since they are there to find out if they should be in college: "I have some people who want to take the class for information, and don't intend to do any of the work", as one instructor described them. Of course, almost all colleges provide guidance and counseling to address the issues of planning, but — as we saw in Working Paper 4 on student support services — there are too few counseling resources in most community colleges, they are being cut back under fiscal pressure, and often faculty complain that counselors are disconnected from programs of study and therefore ignorant about requirements.

> At the same time, the same Learning Assistance Chair said that
>
> We also have the group [of students] that follows the prescribed program, and they may or may not do well. That depends on their initiative and their follow-through. I think we need to do a better job making sure that our students understand their role and responsibility in their own education.

Another English instructor, who had been fretting about the low pass rates in one of the basic English courses, said "it just occurred to me that the people who pass the course are the ones who, from the beginning of the semester, spend 30 minutes in my office each week", illustrating the kind of initiative — in going to office hours, in seeking out help from tutoring and student assistance centers — necessary to be a "college student". One instructor linked this kind of initiative to class-related habits learned in the home:

> I've come to believe that people's cultural or family background is a huge determinant of success. And I separate them — I'll use this language informally — hourly or blue-collar versus professional or white collar. And the mentality of the hourly employee is you do what's required, what you're told to do or asked to do, and of course for a certain length of time.

> And if the task is not finished, it's not your concern. The next shift finishes, or whatever. Professional people are goal–oriented. And you do as much or as little as required to reach that goal.

He replicated almost precisely the analysis of Melvin Kohn's *Class and Conformity* (1969), a little-read book that confirmed with a great deal of data from the U.S. and Italy how middle-class parents tend to rear their children to be independent and self-motivated, while working-class parents are more likely to rear their children to conform and obey the rules, just as working-class jobs require — in the process replicating divisions between students with initiative and independence versus those that passively responded to the rules and requirements of the class, but no more than that.

Similarly, many directors of tutorial or student success centers agreed that the students who showed up were not necessarily the ones who needed the most assistance, but rather the more motivated and aggressive students. As one learning specialist at an Academic Skill Center noted, after describing an Early Alert system that contacts students in academic trouble "intrusively",

> We still know that the motivated students are the ones who come to Supplemental Instruction. The basic skills students, what we call the developmental students, they are not historically the people that seek tutoring.

As a result many such centers are constantly trying new ways to attract a wider variety of students, like using Facebook to "make it cool" and using other forms of "social networking and finding students where they are".

Another dimension of college readiness — or of *un*readiness — emerging from our interviews with instructors and administrators is student fear, the anxiety they feel in coming to college — the subject of a book-length work by Becky Cox called *The College Fear Factor* (2010), who stresses that fearful students often use counter-productive strategies like avoiding office hours, tutoring efforts, group work with other students, and other contact that might reveal their weaknesses. As one director of basic skills in our study noted,

> I know there are a lot of students who kind of want to remain anonymous and stay under the radar. And a lot of it has to do with anxiety — they are just anxious and they don't know how they're going to place on those exams.

In response, many instructors take some time, especially at the beginning of a course, to engage in confidence-building. As one English professor noted,

> I find that once they have it [the first essay assignment] in front of them they get sort of stressed out about it." What do you want? What is it exactly that you are going to want?" Then in a class like English 10 [the most basic English class, three levels below transfer] , I feel like I spend at least the first quarter of the semester building their confidence. When you talk about measuring their learning it is not really measuring it in terms of grading it in the beginning —if they do the work they get the points in the beginning. And I give them lots of feedback, lots of wins. I'm not evaluating so much

When the observer noted that students seemed depressed, in the sense of "squashed down by school for quite a while",[iv] the instructor replied,

> That is a pretty accurate perception. That's why I say I spend the whole first part of the semester building them up a little bit. There is almost nothing better I can do to help them.

The constant praise of students is another effort to build confidence, and many college also have courses and workshops intended to build confidence. One college had a human development course, a life management course, and a specific math anxiety course, while many colleges have developed Student Success courses designed to teach "how to be a college student", to provide access to the variety of student services on campus, and often to help students in planning a program. (For example, see Zeidenberg, Davis, and Calcagno 2008 on the effectiveness of these courses.)

Yet another aspect of college readiness involves student ideas of what "learning" is. Several instructors in reading and writing noted that students seem to enjoy grammar lessons, because that's when they are "really learning" something: learning means rules, regulations, procedures in math but not the conceptual development that could only come through discussions or asking why rules and procedures work as they do. One math instructor, who had abandoned remedial instruction for more conceptual approaches to math, noted that many of his students resisted his approach because they had always been taught math through fragmented, de-contextualized procedures. He agreed with the statement of the interviewer about student complaints that "in none of my other classes do we have to learn, we don't have to understand; we just have to follow the recipe. Couldn't you just tell us how to follow the recipe and then I can chill out a little?" Instead, he noted, "At every opportunity I try to bring other problems back to help them recognize that what they need to be learning is

this big web of instructions, not isolated lessons." Similarly, students often think that "learning" is taking pace when the instructor is lecturing, not when other students are discussing the material or presenting alternative points of view. Yet another instructor, again a math teachers, said

> You know, I say I want you [students] to engage,. And people who are prone to engage just keep going and going and going. Other people would just say, "Will you tell the guy to shut up? We want to hear you [the instructor]. We don't want to hear [the other student]. He's confusing." So he's engaging or she's engaging, but sometimes we go off track. So sometimes it works — not always, but I hope that it's often more engaging than a standard lecture.

This is precisely the point of Becky Cox's *The College Fear Factor*: that students conceive of learning as imbibing information and procedures from the instructor, and they sometime balk at activities — discussions, debates, conceptual approaches that demand that they justify their choices, "this big web of instructions" — that move away from conventional didactic teaching. But learning at the collegiate level is more than passively absorbing information, and students who haven't learned that are again, in a sense, not college ready.

Perhaps the most difficult issue in being a "college student" involves the level of work required. One the one hand, most instructors understand the "chaotic", "busied-up" conditions of students lives. They sometimes accommodate these demands by making sure that all homework assignments can be done in class, avoiding the need to assign homework, or by giving short assignments — 1 – 2 page reading assignments, a one-page paper assignment — which means that the intensity and pacing of classes is incredibly slow. At the

same time, many of them insist that learning requires a certain amount of time, a certain level of work, persistence or stamina or "grit" at academic tasks — and that their students fail to understand this. One vice-president of instruction illustrated the shift:

> One of the other things is our students' concept of time. Saying to a student that it's going to take you three semesters to catch up, we might as well say to them that it's going to be their lifetime. Also, the expectation of study has changed. Our faculty still believe the Carnegie unit – for every hour in class, three hours outside. But I'm not sure it's a mantra that is still being taught as [students] come up. The student's life today is much more crowded than mine was. . . . I go back to the days when I taught art. Our classic example is dexterity for students. Students can't cut by the time of junior high school because we took the scissors away, because they were dangerous. So they don't have dexterity. And I look at it the same way for study, that we have made things simpler along the way, or not helped them expand their attention span for study.

This is yet another complaint about the preparation of students in their earlier schooling, where some of the requirements for academic success — persistence, work, "grit", "expectation of study," attention span — have not been instilled in them earlier. So "college readiness" turns out to have many dimensions, many of them falling in the category of understanding what college requires rather than specific academic skills.

At the extreme, instructors alluded to mental health problems, learning disabilities, and more pervasive developmental delays (what we used to call mental retardation) as reasons for their poor performance. One instructor nicely illustrated the conjunction of negative perceptions with assertions of support:

> I have very fragile students. There are a lot of reasons they are at the level they are, and sometimes it's their own fault. But none of that matters, and

> part of my job is to make them see, "you can do this. You can be successful. And whatever your problems are in the past, we can overcome those".

Another asserted that many of his students, from a low-income community with high levels of gang violence, showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet another was more blunt in referring to developmental delays: "These students are damaged in some way. If you're 20 years old, and you're still taking arithmetic, there's something wrong here." We will return to these claims in Section II, but our point for the moment is that faculty perceive, and label, an enormous variety of ways in which their developmental students "are not ready to be college students".

What can we make of the generally supportive teaching in developmental education, while instructors still make negative comments about students and their readiness to be college students? On the one hand, there's a long and sorry tradition in American education of student-blaming, of ascribing slow progress through schooling — or slow progress through the endless sequence of developmental courses — to the characteristics of students themselves. As one instructor noted,

> The first thing people want to do — this administration is doing this — is use that cop-out as a way not to address it [slow progress] because any kind of change, you got to look at yourself and say OK, maybe I need to do some things differently and take part of the responsibility for it. But it is easy to say, "oh no, it is just the students. They don't know anything. They're not going to be anything." So it is easier to do that.

So it's distressing to see so many instructors describe students in the same terms — "not ready to be college students". On the other hand, based on our classroom observation, their observations are more or less true: many students don't come to class on time, many students don't come to class prepared, many don't do their homework; many are distracted during class by phone calls, texting, the Web, off-topic discussions about family issues; the demands of family life and employment are all too real, and many students who need help from office hours and student services don't avail themselves of that help. Alternatively, some students may resist a college system that continues to view them as deficient. In either case, however, students are undermining their own success by behavior that is inappropriate for college students.

The question, it seems to us, is whether instructors use their perceptions of "students not ready for college" to slow down their courses, to water down the content, to declare that "I can't teach the way I want to because they're not ready for college", versus doing something to make students ready for college. These actions include the efforts that individual teachers make to socialize students to college-level norms, to introduce them to discussions and projects as methods of learning that are superior to information transfer, to curb their distractions and get them to focus on class content. This also happens when departments develop coherent approaches to instruction, like the discussion-based approach to math in one department, or the English department that shifted away from the sentence-paragraph-essay approach to one based on the reading of entre texts, or

the use of Reading Apprenticeship to enable students themselves to generate higher-level questions.

At the institutional level Student Success courses and orientations to college also present some of the habits and attitudes of "being a college student". And in the college with the most comprehensive roster of student support services — Chaffey College, described in Working Paper 5 — different kinds of workshops, tutoring, and other learning opportunities get students to engage more actively with course material, to play a more independent role in their own learning, to shift to meta-cognitive perspectives, and to rely on their own efforts and on peers rather than instructors (or tutors) to get the correct answer. Part of the belief system at this college is that all educational efforts must consider not only the cognitive dimensions of learning, but also the non-cognitive and affective dimensions including attitudes about learning.

To be sure, it might be better for everyone if these dimensions of being a college student, or being "college-ready", were instilled in high school. But as long as instructors and colleges are willing to take the steps necessary to re-socialize students, then their recognition that so many students are not "college ready" turns from a pejorative perception blaming the students for their deficiencies, into a diagnosis of what needs to be done for students and shifting the burden for correction onto the college.

II. Heterogeneity in the Classroom

Another source of information about students is, of course, the classroom, of which we observed close to 150. In observing classes, many different types of students present themselves. From our observations, there are at least five quite different kinds of students, with different learning needs, in developmental classes:

1. *"Brush-up" or "refresher" students*: Some students have mastered basic skills in the past, but have forgotten them — forgotten the various formulas for math, the academic patterns of reading and writing. Instructors estimate that "no more than 10%" of students are brush-up students, suggesting a relatively small number of them. Sometimes they end up in developmental classes because they did not study for the initial assessment test, and did not understand how important the test is to placement. Sometimes they are older students who have been out of any academic setting for a number of years; they may have other advantages since instructors often believe that older students are more motivated, with better-prepared plans for their postsecondary education. Developmental education in colleges began with this kind of student in mind, not the enormous variety who are now included.

Brush-up students do not need to go back to the beginning of math or reading and writing sequences; they need a quick review of topics they have already learned. According to instructors, these are particularly likely to be in math classes since many may not have taken math for the last two years of high

school, and their math skills are therefore rusty. In class, these are the students who understand everything the instructor does, who have ready answers to all questions — since they are in the process of remembering what they have already learned, rather than learning material for the first time. They might be better served not by placement in conventional developmental courses but by a computer-based review of basic academic material or some other individualized program that allows them to move at their own rapid pace. But developmental classes are not usually structured to allow a great deal of internal variation in the pace and content of material, so they are stuck with following the same pace as students who have truly not learned basic academic skills.

2. *Students who have been misplaced by initial assessments*: The process of placements into developmental courses includes an initial placement exam — in the colleges we visited, often ACCUPLACER or the COMPASS. But students are often unaware how important these placement exams are, and they often do not take them seriously (as we will describe in Working Paper 7 on assessment and alignment.) In addition, given the frequent criticism of most assessment tests themselves, there are inaccuracies in placement from these exams.. As a result some students are sometimes placed in remedial courses that they do not need but — without a way of testing out of the class — they are stuck in sequence of developmental classes. Like brush-up students, these are students who generally know everything that is being taught in class since the briefest review is enough to bring these topics back to them. What they really need is either a better

assessment test, some mechanism to test out of a remedial sequence once it is clear that they have been misplaced, or a mechanism to get them to take the placement exam more seriously. For example, several colleges in our sample have instituted preparation programs for the placement exam, taking place two to three weeks before the beginning of the semester; these serve the needs of both brush-up students and student who might otherwise be misplaced because of failing to take the exam seriously.

A very different kind of misplaced student includes those whose primary language is not English, but who have been placed into developmental reading or writing instead of ESL. Rather than the drill and practice common to developmental reading and writing classes, they need the broad range of language-related exercises more typical in ESL classes. Evidently, however, placement procedures are not always precise enough to distinguish ESL students — another reason why we will return to the assessment and placement issue in Working Paper 7.

3. *Students who have genuinely learned very little about basic academic skills in their prior schooling*: The majority of students are surely those who genuinely need further instruction in basic academic skills. This is not because they have not seen these subjects before;[v] fractions and decimals, or subject-verb agreement and parts of speech are part of every elementary school curriculum, with periodic review in middle school. Some students, however, have been in schools

of such poor quality that they never learned appropriate material; as one instructor said,

> I find that a lot of our students have come to us out of learning centers and alternative education, alternative schools or whatever it may be, and really they've been at some sort of institution of non-learning for a number of years. They don't feel successful in school. They don't feel intelligent.

In other cases, students seem to have mastered K-12 material just well enough to follow the procedures necessary to pass tests, but not well enough to retain academic concepts over a longer period of time. This is evident in their basic lack of understanding, in many cases, of numbers and place values, or of when to use multiplication with a set of numbers and when to use some other kind of operation, or of parts of speech and their function in reading and writing. They may have learned about topic sentences at some point, but not well enough to use this idea in their strategies for either reading or writing. These are the students for whom developmental courses are designed, with a sequence of material as far back as necessary, back to the very basics of number and sentence construction.

Why so many students have learned so little about basic academic skills, never mind the "higher-order" competencies necessary for college, is a genuinely puzzling question, and one we will take up in the final working paper in considering how one might create an educational *system* that does not require so much remediation as ours does. However, from community college instructors themselves the dominant answer is that the K-12 system, and more specifically

the high school, have failed: "we're all remedial colleges because the K-12 system is failing them", one instructor mentioned. There's a great deal of high school-bashing, blaming high schools for not being demanding enough: "The bar's just set too low", commented an instructor in a middle-class college with well-regarded feeder high schools. "It's always amazing when you talk to high school students and their parents how little they know", commented another instructor, referring both to academic knowledge as well as "college knowledge" about the process of applying to and getting through college.

To be sure, the pattern of criticizing high schools is part of a larger practice in which each level of the education system blames the level just below it for the weaknesses of students, so again the pattern of passing on some students who are not ready — in this case, not college ready — is a systemic problem, not one confined to the high school. But in California there is at least some evidence that criticism is justified because the quality of K-12 schooling has deteriorated substantially, with inadequate funding and other resources ever since the state passed a proposition in 1978 limiting property taxation. In the most recent NAEP assessments, California 8th graders ranked in the bottom 7 states in reading, and among the bottom 9 states in math, so they are genuinely under-prepared relative to their peers in most other states. This is surely one of the reasons that the proportion of entering students needing remediation in California is higher, around 80%, than the national figure of about 60%.

There are, of course, other sources of blame for low academic performance aside from the quality of the K-12 system. Some instructors engaged in a kind of cultural critique of life in the U.S., with computer games and cell phones and other electronic gadgets distracting students from the hard work of academic success. Recently there has been a wave of newspaper stories about psychology experiments related to delayed gratification, with children unable to delay gratification turning into poorer students; this is another kind of cultural critique of the U.S., as a nation oriented more to instant gratification rather than "the long-term gratification of reading a book", as one instructor put it. Like high school-bashing, such criticisms help explain why many students have such weak command of basic skills, though they also defend community college instructors against blame for the continued poor performance of developmental students.

So even though there may be some brush-up students and misplaced students in developmental classrooms, there's little doubt that most of the students present do in fact need some remedial coursework. When instructors teach to the middle of the class, these are the students who are the targets of their instruction.

4. *Students with learning disabilities (LDs):* In observing classes it appears, even to untrained observers, that a number of students suffer from learning disabilities. These are students who seem to work through problems at an excruciatingly slow pace, who seem to have trouble retaining simple information or directions, who remain genuinely confused about what a number or a verb is

even after several explanations. To be sure, the observers in this project are not trained to detect signs of learning disabilities — as instructors are not — but the behavior of some students alerted us to this possibility.

A few instructors talked about the problems of having students with leaning disabilities in their classes, corroborating our perception that such students are present. One instructor in a middle-class college went through a list of potential diagnoses: "Some students are learning disabled, not diagnosed; those with really low IQ are ten percent of my class, or ADHD, or borderline retarded". Another commented on the effect on student morale:

> Then you get students with learning disabilities too, and that's even worse. They already know they suck, and then to have a class just come around and beat on them. . . There is nothing they can do about it because they just can't learn as quickly as other people can.

Yet another, an instructor in a Learning Center, was uncharacteristically blunt about the problems for instructors:

> Most of the students here [in basic courses at the bottom] are like — they have mental problems, honestly. These are DSS [Department of Special Services] students. . .And I used to teach these classes, and I know that it's really hard to deal with this kind of student. One [kind of student] is like a normal regular student — understands the concepts and everything and knows how to behave; but the other students they don't understand. And besides this they don't know how to behave in class. . . just as an instructor you cannot deal with these people.

This passage, contrasting "normal regular students" with students having "mental problems" was essentially a complaint that conventional instructors

(people prepared "just as an instructor") are not trained to deal with the various cognitive and behavioral problems of learning disabled students.

One of the underlying problems is that instructors are prepared neither to diagnose nor to treat learning disabilities. In K-12 education, programs in special education are responsible for carrying out this function, and they enlist teachers as well as parents in identifying and then treating learning disabilities or many different kinds. But with adults in community colleges, Departments of Special Services are quite small and have no authority to seek out LD students; they are also organized in student service offices relatively independent of instruction, making coordination difficult. If students do not self-refer, then there is no way that even limited resources can be used to address these problems.

Of course neither we nor anyone else knows the magnitude of learning disabilities in developmental classrooms. Our point here is not that learning disabilities account for the large numbers of students in basic skills classrooms, but rather that there is no workable mechanism operating in the colleges we examined to diagnose or respond to this problem, as there is in K-12 education. Indeed, instructors are not even allowed to ask if students have any disabilities, making the role of getting them any support that much more complicated. Until such a role can be developed and institutionalized, then developmental instructors must cope with LD students as best they can, within the mix of many types of students they face.

5. *Students with mental health problems:* Again, observations in classes suggest that still other students have a variety of mental health problems — compulsions, depression leading to extreme passivity, anxiety of different kinds, sometimes more extreme problems; one instructor talked at length about the extent of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome in the community because of the prevalence of gang- and gun-related violence. Sometimes student behavior in class makes these conditions obvious, but of course at other times — especially with depression and anxiety that do not manifest themselves in "problem" behavior — neither we as observers nor instructors are in any position to know about these conditions. Indeed, instructors usually do not know about such conditions, and indeed (as with learning disabilities) are prohibited by student privacy rules from asking about them. As one said,

> The reality for me, when I taught arithmetic, is that they had so many issues beyond arithmetic skills . . . We're not allowed to know. If we have students that are on medications or have emotional issues — unless the student comes up and self-identifies. . . . If they are willing to talk about it, often you can get them to supportive services. Every so often, though, you will get somebody in complete denial, and there's not much you can do except try and keep on.

As in the case of students with learning disabilities, the diagnostic capacities of community colleges with respect to mental health conditions are limited, and there is no mechanism (like special education in K-12, or sometimes school-based health centers) to assure that any diagnosis is matched by treatment— students need their own health insurance to pay for treatment.

Even in a class where all the students seem to be about the same, in the sense that all of them have scored below some standard on the assessment exam, the reasons for any basic skills deficiencies may vary widely. One dean of basic skills described a typical class on his campus:

> It's really difficult to teach an English course where, say, out of 20 people, five never woke up in high school, five can't speak the English language, four or five have a degree from a Persian university. It's like you're teaching to four or five different populations at once, and that's really a demand for a teacher. If you were new to the craft, I think it might sink one. . . Sometimes they [courses] just can't go well because of the make-up of the course and the failure of the educational system to get people where they need to be.

So even though many developmental students may have gone through American high schools and failed to learn enough ("never woke up"), in practice students who might be better off in ESL may also be in the class, including some whose education in foreign countries was quite high-level.

The upshot of the extreme differences in developmental students is that all five kinds of students may be in a developmental classroom, but the instructor first doesn't know much about the needs of individual students, and second has nothing except conventional teaching aimed at the middling group — those students who have not mastered basic skills in K-12 education. But brush-up and misclassified students need something completely different — either a mechanism to test out of a developmental sequence, or an individualized remedial program, perhaps computer-based. And students with disabilities and mental health problems need services that the instructor cannot provide — and,

usually, that the college cannot provide either. The result is an unknown number of students who needs cannot be met within the conventional framework of developmental education.

III. Some Solutions: The Differentiated College

For an institution like the community college, which by construction accepts an enormous variety of students, the persistent challenge is to differentiate its offerings enough to meet the varying needs of its very different students. Community colleges already have a wide number of mechanisms to provide different types of differentiation for students with different types of problems. Student support services, profiled in Working Paper 4, provide varying amounts of help to students with varying levels of academic and non-academic difficulty, though their effects are limited. Colleges typically have special services for students with various disabilities, called DSPS (Disabled Student Programs and Services) in California, and other for various kinds of "disadvantaged" students (called EOPS, or Extended Opportunity Programs and Services). Many colleges have developed learning communities for distinctive groups of students — African American or Latino students, or older students, for example, though these tend to serve relatively small numbers. The entire basic skills enterprise, including ESL, can be interpreted as a way of meeting the needs of students with varied levels of academic preparation, allowing them to join a

developmental sequence at the levels they need. Indeed, the problem often seems to be that the community college is *overly* differentiated, with an array of special services and programs that are too complex for students to understand, never mind negotiate.

But this Working Paper has implicitly argued that colleges are still not differentiated enough, since the variety of students and their needs *within* basic skills courses is still too great for conventional courses to manage. So these findings create a number of recommendations — some obvious and widespread, some not so obvious — that might enable colleges to better meet the needs of their varied students:

• Colleges could work more with high schools to alert both teachers and students to the nature of "college readiness", and to the multiple dimensions of what college readiness requires. In our sample of 13 colleges, only two had serious efforts to work with feeder high schools, and these were necessarily limited because neither colleges nor high schools are explicitly funded to develop coordination mechanisms. Currently there are efforts in California to establish a common assessment test for basic skills and to administer this test to high school juniors — perhaps a step in the right direction, but also a case of "too little, too late" for those individuals whose academic and behavioral capacities are poorly developed. But opportunities exist to do more: high schools have finally been alerted to the pervasiveness of the college readiness problem, and the advent of

the Common Core Standards for K-12 education presents the possibilities for embedding dimensions of readiness into this common core.

• Colleges could provide a great variety of services, including College Success courses, explicitly to help students with the behavioral aspects of college readiness. To be sure, some colleges we visited already have a substantial array of such courses — one offered five such courses — but others have many fewer options. An alternative solution would be to provide more integrated opportunities to learn how to be better students, either in classrooms themselves or in workshops parallel to developmental courses. And there's the issue of whether to make such courses and workshops mandatory, or mandatory for some segment of the college population (like those that assess into developmental courses) so that those who most need such courses receive them.

• More accurate assessments are necessary, particularly to distinguish brush-up students from those whose knowledge of basic skills is truly deficient. Refresher courses that students could take before any assessment are another way to distinguish between brush-up students and others, but again these are now relatively uncommon in colleges.

• Testing-out options should be available at every stage, to make sure that students have a chance to show they have mastered certain skills — rather than simply sitting through an unnecessary developmental sequence.

• Individualized options should be available, to distinguish among students with pervasive basic skills needs versus those who need remediation in

one or two sub-skills. These could be developed either with computer-based programs, or by modularizing basic skills sequences. For example, the state of Virginia is moving toward a modularized system where each area of basic skills is broken into nine modules; then students take only the individual modules that they need. Unfortunately, developing modules for sub-skills is likely to lead back to remedial pedagogy, so some way needs to be found to develop modules that are oriented to conceptual understanding, real applications of basic skills, and active student participation to avoid some of the most obvious faults of remedial teaching.

• Instructors could be trained in the use of Differentiated Instruction (DI). DI is a method developed in K-12 education of allowing instructors to work with groups of relatively heterogeneous students, for example by using different readings or different problem sets for distinct groups of students. The idea is that any such groupings are only temporary (rather than permanent "tracking"), and that once students master certain skills they can rejoin the majority of the class. Unfortunately, while DI is a pedagogical method for coping with heterogeneous classes, it is also a difficult technique to master (and especially with adjuncts with little preparation time), so it would require a new orientation toward pedagogical expertise among college faculty.

• Colleges need greater diagnostic capacities to detect learning disabilities, and any mental health problems that interfere with classroom performance. This could be done either by expanding current services for

student with disabilities, or by working through faculty — for example, by providing workshops to faculty about detecting learning disabilities or mental health problems, and relying on faculty to refer students with special needs. Of course, community college students are still adults and so — as is true for student services generally — there is few ways to force them to use diagnostic services.

Overall, these recommendations suggest an institution that is even more complex and differentiated than colleges are now. This would also be a more expensive institution since most of these new activities would require more staff — for creating ties to high schools, for staffing more courses like College Success, for administering testing-out options, for developing and implementing individual options for basic skills instruction, for professional development aimed at instructors, for greater capacity related to disabled students. Policy-makers who seek to use community colleges as low-cost alternatives to four-year colleges would probably not support such changes. But without the additional resources necessary for more differentiation, community colleges will remain unable to cope with the extreme variation in students who attend, and developmental education will continue to be a filtering mechanism rather than one that allows students to continue their educational trajectories.

FOOTNOTES

[i] Instructors in adult education usually prepare students to pass the GED exam; but because this exam tests a series of sub-skills, it readily leads to remedial pedagogy.

[ii] See Gittell and Steffey (2000); Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002); California Tomorrow (2002); and Woodlief, Thomas, and Orozco (2003), especially Chapter 3.

[iii] On experimenters, see Manski (1989) and Grubb and Associates (1999), pp. 4 – 5.

[iv] This particular observer has spent her career teaching basic skills, so her perception of students "squashed down by school" is the result of long experience.

[v] However, a very small number of students may have avoided large chunks of their schooling. One student told us a story of being called stupid in fourth grade, when she left school until she managed to enroll in the community college as an adult.

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