

# Board Briefs

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## Developmental Education

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## Developmental Education

*No educational program is as misunderstood or underappreciated as community college developmental education. Both legislatures and colleges give it low priority. Community colleges have a clear obligation to do their best for everyone. Yet in serving underprepared students, more often than not this obligation goes unmet. Institutions underfund programs, hire primarily part-time instructors, and use ineffective educational practices. This is shameful and unacceptable. Community colleges must do better.*

Robert H. McCabe (2003)  
President Emeritus of Miami-Dade College and  
Senior Fellow, League for Innovation in the Community College

## A Community College Mandate

This issue of *Board Briefs* spotlights the component of the comprehensive mission that is variously known as basic skills, compensatory, developmental, pre-collegiate, or remedial education. Referred to in this brief as developmental education, it includes formal coursework in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as programs that affect the attitudes and habits related to effective learning – study skills, confidence, and an ability to persevere and succeed.

Historically remediation has been a thorny issue, made more so by leaders who have been reluctant to acknowledge the depth of the challenges or take the steps necessary to overcome them.

Policymakers, for example, have complained about having to pay twice, for both public school and college students, to prepare them to be college ready. Image-conscious college officials and faculty, fearing their colleges will be labeled "remedial" institutions, have too often relegated

developmental education to the periphery of their priorities.

Despite these issues, and because the urgent need for remediation continues to grow, today virtually all community colleges offer developmental education and nationally almost 60% of community college students require at least one year of developmental course work.



## Urgency at All Levels – National, State, and Local

### DCCCD

% Contact Hours Taught  
by Adjunct Faculty

Courses	Fall	
	2008	2010
Dev Math	63	65
Dev Reading	53	54
Dev Writing	62	61

*On a district-wide basis,  
adjunct faculty teach 46% of  
all contact hours.*

There are many facets to the challenge of working with underprepared students that need to be rethought or strengthened – funding formulas, public advocacy, student support programs, better data systems, and classroom instruction.

At the national level AACC and ACCT regularly testify before Congress about the need for more resources to support developmental education. Furthermore, in presenting the case to policymakers, they continually link

financial aid to developmental education, pointing out that **low income students are the most likely to need remediation.**

At the state level, the picture is complex and active. Some states prevent or discourage public four-year institutions from offering remedial courses to their students, thus placing the total responsibility on community colleges. Other states provide no funding for remedial education.

California as a bellwether state reports staggering enrollment growth in developmental education. Up to 90 percent of incoming, first-time community college students test below college level in math, and in reading and writing the number is over 70 percent. Maryland is the only state that requires students to complete remedial courses before taking college-level courses.

## DCCCD Trustees Make a Commitment

Since almost 70 percent of incoming students in DCCCD colleges require remediation, trustees have a particular interest in developmental education. In 2008-09, DCCCD's board made it the focus of a specially funded retention initiative by designating \$1.65 million that year alone for addressing two of the board's goals: 1) *The*

*College District's rate of student retention within courses – the proportion of students who successfully complete – will increase. 2) The College District will apply and continuously improve a systematic approach to facilitating successful course completion for students enrolling the first time in fall semesters.*

The initial emphasis is on improving success rates in **developmental mathematics**, viewed as perhaps **the most significant barrier between underprepared students and a college education.**

The best single predictor of graduation is the academic skills of the entering student.

## Who Are the Underprepared Students?

The large number of students in need of remediation are a varied group, more female than male, about equally recent high school graduates and mature adults, and over-represented by minorities. **But more than any other single factor, poverty is**

**most clearly correlated with academic deficiencies in students.**

There is great variation in the depth of these deficiencies. One-third of students are deficient in reading, writing and math; one-third in two of the three subjects; and one-

third in only one.

These students often do not think of themselves as "college material." Although they bring powerful life experiences, most need help to see these experiences as assets in an academic setting.

## Exemplary Program Elements...

**First, Assessment and Placement:** If a college is serious about properly serving its underprepared population, it must first **assess all entering students** to determine if a student is prepared to profit from instruction in a particular course or program. But many community colleges struggle over enforcing the requirement for part-time, evening, or off-campus students. Though logistics may be challenging, all students need to be assessed.

Once an institution makes the commitment to entry assessment, it then needs to require those who score poorly to take developmental education coursework. Colleges must be serious about **mandatory placement**. Enrolling students in courses for which they are underprepared will only

result in high rates of failure and drop-out. Too often, concerns about enrollment numbers and late registration influence decisions about mandatory assessment and placement.

**Student Services – A Continuum of Help:** Researchers consistently document that developmental students' personal needs, habits, and attitudes are important. In fact, these needs often require the most attention. Financial aid, advising, counseling, and tutoring are all part of the continuum, as is the support of faculty and peers. Students are best served when all elements of this support are combined in a coordinated constellation of services.

**What Happens in the Classroom Is Pivotal:** The core activity of education – teachers and

students working together in the classroom – is especially important for community college students because for many it is the only point of contact with the institution.

The classroom is also critical because most entering students have already studied the subjects they will encounter in their developmental courses. Unfortunately, their previous work has not sufficiently prepared them for college-level work. The challenge is to find more effective teaching approaches.

In testimony before Texas House Higher Education Committee in April 2008, Commissioner Raymund Paredes reported that 89 percent of students either do not complete developmental education or opt out of taking the college-level course. Ultimately, they do not complete a first college-level course in math, reading, or writing.

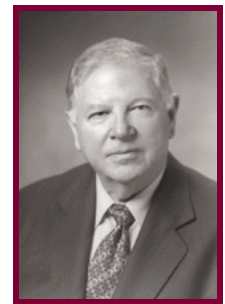
He went on to say, “...we have tremendous attrition before students get to the first college-level course. But if they survive and do in fact take the college-level course, they are successful at a rate of about two-thirds in math, reading, and writing.”

McCabe's writings indicate that students who complete remediation, albeit a small proportion, are 98 percent employed and 90 percent in more than entry-level jobs 10 years later.

## Faculty Are the Lynchpin

Faculty and counselors require commitment, passion, and substantial expertise to work with underprepared students. This is not the place for new faculty members straight out of graduate school, unless they are specifically prepared for this work. Furthermore, because of its importance, the assignment should be prestigious.

Unfortunately, many developmental educators enter the field with little or no specific training. Thus the college must take responsibility for their professional development, including the large numbers of adjunct faculty who are likely to teach a majority of these courses.



Robert H. McCabe  
Widely regarded as an expert and leading advocate for developmental students and programs

Photo: Murnor Studio



Diane Martin  
1988, Eastfield



James Swindling  
1993, Eastfield



Spencer Olesen  
1995, Mountain View



Delryn Fleming  
1996, Brookhaven



Susan Faulkner  
1999, Cedar Valley

## Teaching “Basic Skills” Is Not Easy

“Basic skills” are not so basic, and they are definitely not simple – either to learn or to teach.

**Take reading.** Some children enter elementary school severely underprepared. Without adequate listening comprehension, reading readiness, and family support for education, they start school with imposing challenges.

Many will never catch up.

**Then there is writing.** Is the difference between basic and average writers merely a matter of error count? Hardly. An average writer may produce a paper that is grammatically flawless, yet says very little. In contrast, some basic writers produce papers that are rich in language and meaning.

**And math.** More students begin college underprepared in math than any other subject. Many students accept their poor math skills, even brag “I’m not good at math.” To complicate matters, expectations for beginning math students vary widely among states and colleges. The challenge cannot be overstated.

## Developmental Educators Receive Highest Award

Each year a single DCCCD faculty member receives the Miles Production Outstanding Faculty Award. Selected by the Chancellor and Faculty Council from among seven college winners, this professional receives the District’s

highest annual accolade for teaching excellence. Over the 25 years the award has been given, five of these recipients have taught developmental education. [See photos at left, some taken from archived staff directories.] Their

recognition by their associates and peers as “the best of the best” speaks not only to their skill and dedication, but to the institution-wide regard for developmental education.

## Striving for Best Practice – NADE Certification

Many programs seriously striving for best practice will work toward National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) Program Certification. This certification was launched in 1999 to recognize programs that meet or exceed criteria of good practices as defined by research.

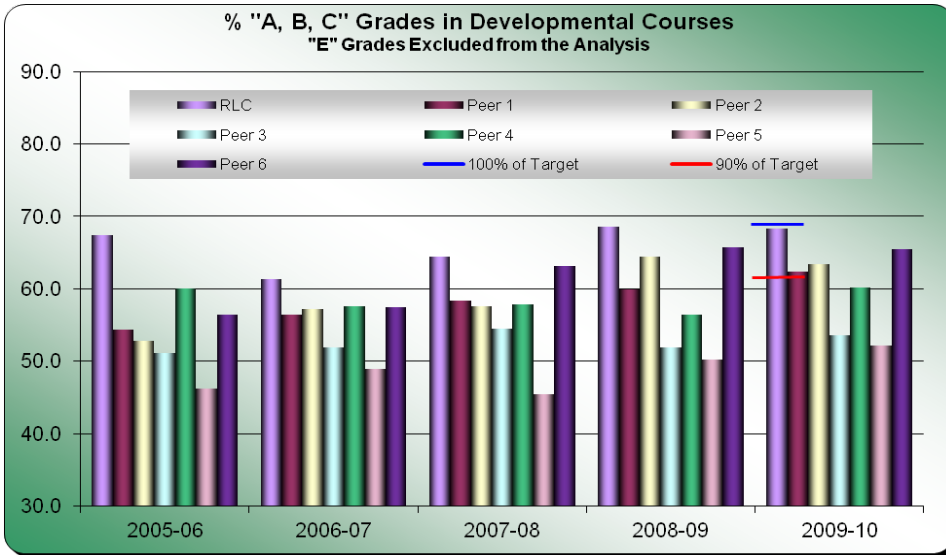
To apply for certification, programs must have (1) written mission, goals, and objectives for the

developmental education program. Then the component being certified – tutoring services, developmental coursework, or adjunct instructional programs must (2) build on a theoretical framework using relevant program design and pedagogy; (3) demonstrate that systematic evaluation of student-centered goals have been met; (4) use evaluation results for program improvement; (5)

demonstrate three years of data showing positive student outcomes or trend data; and (6) assure that College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) tutor certification is in process or completed.

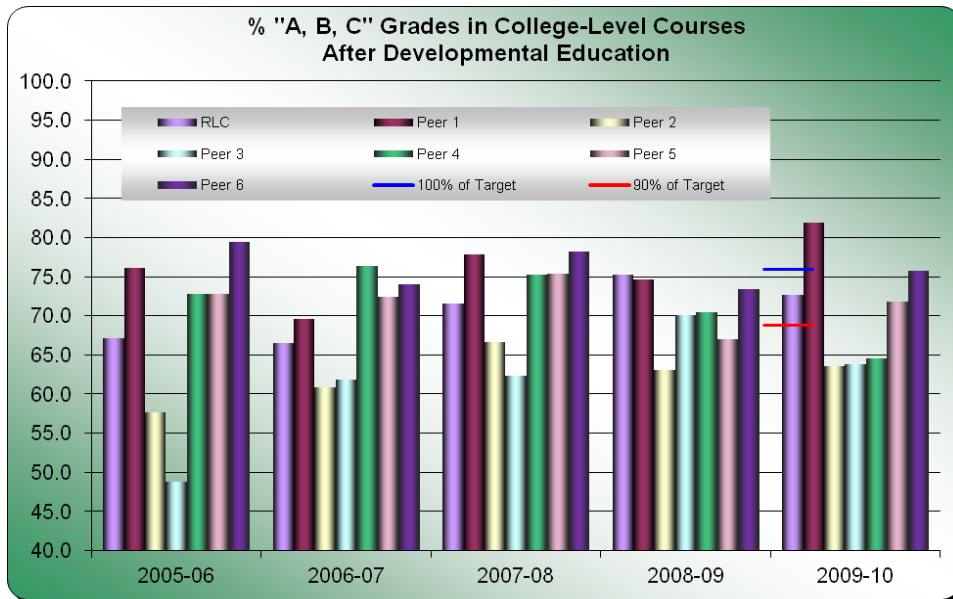
See page 5 for examples related to (3) - (5) of the NADE criteria.

## Using Data to Improve Performance



The graphics on this page, from the Richland College *End of Year Report for Academic Year 2009-10*, display results from benchmarking data against peer institutions over a five-year period.

(top) The leadership team tracks the percentage of A, B and C grades awarded in developmental courses, including developmental mathematics, reading, and writing. Richland's results in 2009-10 are about the same as the previous year, around 68%.



(middle) Leadership also monitors the success of students in college-level courses after completion of developmental coursework. In 2009-10, performance on this measure fell within the target range. Richland's performance fell short of Peers 1 and 6, the best performers. Note: Trend data is not applicable in this chart because prior years are updated to include students passing in subsequent years.

Success after Developmental Completion for Fall 2008 Cohort				
Grade of "C" or better	RLC		NCCBP*	
	Actual %	% Rank	Median	90th %
Course Completers (Ws excluded)				
College Level Math	81	60	78	90
English 1301	87	78	81	90
Course Enrollees (Ws included)				
College Level Math	65	43	67	79
English 1301	75	66	71	82

(bottom) Richland also compares its results to the National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP\*).

Source: [www.richlandcollege.edu](http://www.richlandcollege.edu); then search "end of year reports"

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## Tackling the "Lost Before They Start" Syndrome

Recent analysis suggests that a substantial number of students either never enroll or drop out.

Students who require the most remedial work – three or more courses – are the most likely either to not enroll or to drop out soon thereafter.

Understandably these students are discouraged by the prospect of going months or years without earning college-level credit.

Thus, in an important innovation, **community colleges are looking for ways to fast-track**

**developmental students from those with greatest deficiencies to those who only need refresher work.**

### *Giving Credit to the Sources*

Sources for this issue include *Yes We Can! A Community College Guide for Developing America's Underprepared*, edited by Robert H. McCabe and published by the League for Innovation and American Association of Community Colleges (2003); The Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching, *Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges* (2008); and *Developmental Education Toolkit* written by Thomas G. Greene, University of Texas at Austin (2008).

Readers who desire additional information are

invited to review Texas Commissioner of Higher Education Raymund Paredes' testimony before the House Higher Education Committee, April 1, 2008, available on the THECB web site at [www.thecb.state.tx.us/Commissioner/](http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/Commissioner/).

### *About Our Organization...*

*The mission of DCCCD is to equip students for successful living and responsible citizenship in a rapidly changing local, national and world community. Educational opportunities are offered without regard to race, color, age, national origin, religion, sex, disability, sexual orientation or genetic information. Equal educational opportunity includes admission, recruitment, extra-curricular programs and activities, access to course offerings, counseling and testing, financial aid, employment, health and insurance services, and athletics.*

## Takeaways from this Issue

### ACROSS

1. Developmental \_\_\_ is viewed as perhaps the most significant barrier between underprepared students and a college education.
5. Colleges must take responsibility for developmental educators professional development, including the large numbers of \_\_\_ faculty who are likely to teach a majority of these courses.
7. In an important innovation, community colleges are looking for ways to \_\_\_ track developmental students from those with greatest deficiencies to those who only need refresher work.
8. Developmental students often do not think of themselves as \_\_\_ material.
9. Once the institution makes the commitment to entry assessment, it then needs to \_\_\_ those who score poorly to take developmental education coursework.
10. \_\_\_ education includes formal coursework in reading, writing, and mathematics.

### DOWN

2. Many developmental programs seriously striving for best practice will work toward National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) \_\_\_.
3. More than any other single factor, \_\_\_ is most clearly correlated with academic deficiencies in students.
4. \_\_\_ are in lynchpin.
6. In Texas 89 percent of students who require developmental education never \_\_\_ the first college-level course in math.

