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AUTHOR Corak, Kitty
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ABSTRACT

The question of whether basic skills courses belong in higher education is examined through a review of the literature. The following issues are discussed in terms of opposing and supporting positions: (1) economic concerns (recruitment of a wider pool of students necessitate basic skills courses but preserve enrollment levels); (2) academic concerns (educational quality, appropriate staffing, credit, loss of funds from academic programs); (3) legal concerns (litigation by students against institutions); (4) ethical concerns (obligation to society and the needs of varying types of students); and (5) philosophic concerns (definition of institutional mission and the place for basic skills education). The following types of proactive responses by the academic community to the basic skills needs of undergraduates are then discussed: cognitive skills (higher-order thinking skills); study skills (listening skills, note-taking, outlying, test-taking, time management); language skills; and personal development (attitudes, self-discipline, personal responsibility). Five problems that occur in basic skills programs are also described, including coordination, magnitude of the program, the presence of opposition, collection of student performance data, and status within the academic community. Contains 41 references. (KM)

"Basic Skills Education:
The Dialectics of Reconciliation"

by

Kitty Corak

The Claremont Graduate School
California

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under the title:
"Effective Advising of the Underprepared: A Time to Reconsider"

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Introduction

The question of whether or not basic skills education is appropriate to include in the higher education curricula is one that has been hotly debated on campuses for many years. Referenced in the literature also as remedial or developmental education, it is an issue that has been resolved and the courses begrudgingly accepted. However, undercurrents of disgruntlement remain. Thus, the matter is never quite laid to rest. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to summarize the points of contention s rounding basic skills curriculum in higher education and to analyze program models to determine the extent of content areas addressed by basic skills courses.

The most widely accepted definition of the term "basic skills" includes the abilities to read, write, and perform simple mathematic operations appropriate to one's grade level. For entering college freshmen this would translate to a minimum of twelfth grade preparation in these areas. Assuredly there is a need among the college age cohort for a bolstering of these rudimentar, abilities. The reading level of the average entering freshman appears to be no higher than eighth grade, a decline of at least two grade levels since 1971 (Roueche & Armes, 1980).

A recent national study obtained information from over 1200 colleges and universities relevant to the academic preparation of incoming undergraduate students and the ways in which their deficiencies are being remediated (Lederman, Ryzewic, & Ribaudo, 1983). Some of the findings were that 85% of the responding institutions perceive poor academic preparation of incoming

students to be either very much a problem or somewhat of a problem, that 28% of entering freshmen are perceived as needing assistance in reading, 31% in writing, and 32% in mathematics, and that the overwhelming majority of institutions offer courses in the basic skills (more than 8 out of 10 offer reading and math courses, and more than 9 out of 10 offer writing courses). As long as such a need and activity exist, the basic skills in higher education question will remain with us.

The Issues

Do basic skills courses belong in higher education? A review of the literature indicates that arguments for the opposing positions are articulated along one or more of the five dimensions: the economic, academic, legal, ethical, and philosophical concerns of the institution. The most frequently voiced conflicting views on the matter are a distilled version of these dimensions. Those in favor of including basic skills courses in higher education note that without them enrollment would be drastically imperiled. Those opposed argue that their inclusion is at the expense of other academic efforts and results in a reduction in quality of the educational product.

Economic Concerns. The economic aspects of the basic skills issue are closely tied to recent history. In the late 1960s it became apparent that the post-World War II baby boom generation was approaching completion of its move through the postsecondary system. Campuses across the country had geared up to teach those waves of students, adding programs and faculty lines and student

services to meet their needs. Increased operating costs were easily justified and absorbed by the enrollment-driven funding formulas adopted by most institutions. Yet, demographic predictions of what was to come were gloomy. The traditional student pool, the cohort of high school graduates, would shrink substantially. Unless new student markets could be developed to replenish the once abundant supply, many postsecondary schools would face significant financial upheaval.

In response to the forecast of enrollment declines, higher education began to counter on several fronts. Recruiting techniques became more refined and aggressive as a whole new variety of student markets was courted. These solicited student pools included women, minorities, veterans, commuters, part-timers, handicapped, and nontraditional (older, returning) students. Innovative academic and support programs were designed to attract these students and facilitate their transition to the campus. Examples of these endeavors include, women's studies, ethnic studies, night school, and child care, to name but a few. Accordingly, admissions practices and standards were eased on the four-year campuses to expedite access for these students whose presence would help offset projected enrollment declines.

The development of these student markets resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of students on the four-year campus who were ill-prepared to complete college level work. There was no recourse but to begin offering classes that would remediate deficiencies in the areas of reading, writing, and math

skills. It became apparent that if higher education was to attract and retain students it would have to provide these basic skills to growing numbers of the underprepared so that they might eventually advance to graduation. This proved to be a burden for four-year campuses. The two-year systems, fortunately had long since integrated basic skills course work into their offerings (Vincent, 1981-82) and thus were not nearly as affected by these changing student needs.

The attraction of new student pools and the provision of basic skills courses did indeed help to substantiate projections that modest increases in college and university enrollments would be witnessed through the early-to-mid 1980s. At this point enrollment pinnacles virtually have been reached. Gradual but steady declines in the numbers of enrolled college students are likely to persist until the turn of the century.

Efforts to stabilize enrollments were initiated to preserve and protect existing academic programs. In colleges and universities where student numbers are intricately tied to institutional funding, reductions in enrollment subsequently lead to reductions in faculty and support staff lines. Thus, when matters of economics are considered, a good case can be made for the inclusion of basic skills courses in higher education because they do help to keep the students on the campus and the faculty on the payroll.

Academic Concerns. The general underpreparedness of undergraduates is a widely shared concern. This is evidenced by

ongoing studies conducted both by corporate groups and various state organizations investigating quality of education issues. In fact, a group commissioned to study higher education by the American Council on Education placed as a first priority the strengthening of the place of quality as a core value in higher education. One of the first questions the commission raised during the 1981-82 academic year was: "What policies and programs should institutions adopt to encourage intellectual motivation of students, including advancing the intellectual quality of students before [italics added] they enter college...?" (Stauffer, 1981, p. 52). Higher education recognizes that basic skills deficiencies must be addressed in the student's academic career earlier than at the threshold of the postsecondary campus. As a result many institutions are actively promoting "articulation agreements" with area high schools to encourage better preparedness among the students who would hope to matriculate to college.

At face value it is often difficult to reconcile "basic" skills with "higher" education. This objection is not easily set aside by faculties who are evidencing renewed concerns for high standards and for a revamping of the curriculum to assure either the maintenance or the upgrading of quality. Hartle, Baratz, and Crafa (1979) note that the movement for standard setting has taken two separate yet related directions. Those who revise curricula to identify learning that college graduates should commonly possess follow the "Renaissance Man" standard. Those

who seek to correct basic deficiencies in students' reading, writing, and math skills follow the "Literate Man" standard. Personal as well as institutional values affect the directions each campus takes when it initiates curriculum changes.

Another concern of an academic nature pertains to the question of who will be assigned to teach basic skills courses. Often these classes are taught by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who bring varying degrees of teaching proficiency into the classroom. If GTAs are unavailable, faculty members must be assigned to these courses. This frequently raises questions about the role of the instructor. Marshak and Wurtemburg (1981) note that faculty objections to the concept of open admissions and resulting basic skills courses often center around problems associated with teaching types of students for which purpose they had not been trained. It is perhaps not so surprising that faculty members report they would prefer to stay out of what is perceived to be the remedial aspects of education (Stahl, 19891). Yet many appear willing to participate in inservice programs aimed at helping them work more effectively with students having inadequate skills (Sartain, et al., 1982, Stahl, 1981). This may be because students with basic skills deficiencies are not solely relegated to remedial courses; they are also mainstreamed into other courses throughout the campus. An inservice module that acquaints participants not only with what is being done locally to help such students but also with what can and has been done

elsewhere may be most helpful to include in these inservice programs.

In addition to concerns of academic quality and of appropriate staffing, there is the issue of whether or not basic skills courses should be awarded credit. Some campuses have chosen to permit them to count toward the minimum number of credits required each term to qualify a student as full time. Financial aid recipients are often well served with such considerations. However, remedial course credits often do not count toward the total number of credits required for graduation because the course content is believed to be precollegiate level. Although that supposition may be well founded, evidence exists that completion rates of these courses are indeed affected by whether or not the credits can be used to fulfill graduation requirements. If they may be applied toward graduation, the percent of students completing the term (and thus earning the credits) has been shown to increase dramatically (Brod, 1981). In either circumstance it must also be decided whether students may earn a traditional letter grade or must be restricted to a "pass/no pass" option. As such outcomes affect the cumulative grade point average, this is yet one more of the "for credit or not" considerations with which each campus must grapple.

A final academic concern also has economic implications. When money is channeled into basic skills improvement, it typically is being redirected away from existing academic programs and departments. These programs of study need (and

expect) to have essential laboratory equipment in place, up-to-date journals in the library, and adequate classroom space available. Basic skills courses compete for the dollars that might otherwise provide for such necessities, let alone for more equivocal expenses such as communications and travel budgets.

Legal Concerns. The traditional relationship between the student and the college or university began to change in the decade of the 1960s. Then the 1971 passage of the 26th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States granted eighteen year olds the right to vote, conferring adult status on that age group. Subsequent litigation coupled with shifting campus attitudes, undermined the in loco parentis role of higher education and established grounds for students to enter into legally binding contract with educational institutions. Since the 1970s, then, there has been a thrust toward legalism and consumerism in higher education whereby students consider themselves buyers of education. The courts historically have not appeared eager to enter into the educational arena, preferring not to usurp academic prerogatives. Nonetheless, as rulings have continued to result from court actions, four legal doctrines have emerged: (1) that higher education is a privilege and not a right, (2) that the student and the college are parties to a contract, (3) that a fiduciary relationship is established when one party (the student) places confidence in the integrity and fidelity of the other (the college), and (4) that the student, as

a citizen retains all consitutional rights while enrolled in a higher education institute (Rollins, 1978).

Claims initiated by students against higher education appear to be founded either on contract theory or on tort theory. Courts are willing to enforce the institution's expressed or implied contractual obligations to students and have compelled colleges and universities to award damages as well as to confer unearned degrees because of inaccurate information in their catalogues. Because the catalogue has been upheld in the courts as a contract between the student consumer and the institution, the issue of "obligation to provide" arises. Peretti v. State of Montana (1979) established that after a student enrolls in a degree program the institution is obligated to provide courses necessary to complete the program. In this case, courses advertised in the catalogue were abruptly discontinued and the students could not complete the degree. The issue was not basic skills related. However, it is conceivable that one day students may charge an institution with not providing the basic skills courses needed to complete degree work. If breach of contract cannot be argued along these lines, then tort theory may provide a basis.

A tort is any wrong other than breach of contract for which civil suit can be filed. Weeks (1980) notes that modern law is assisting the development of a new tort, the failure to educate. Students' claims for damages are based either on negligence or misrepresentation. Educational malpractice suits can result from

claims of negligence. To successfully press a negligence claim the plaintiff must prove that the institution owed "a duty of care to exercise reasonable care in the institution and supervision of students; there was a breach of that duty; and the breach caused injury [to the plaintiff]" (p. 37). The courts have been reluctant to pass judgment for the plaintiff on grounds of negligence, recognizing that many variables contribute to the achievement of literacy, some of which are outside the scope of the educational system (Ross, 1983). They also have drawn a distinction between the liability of teachers who fail to perform their duties and the liability incurred by students who fail to learn (Weeks, 1980).

Another claim that has not fared well in the courts is that of misrepresentation and fraud. In these cases the student argues that the institution has intentionally misrepresented an educational program, that the student had put trust into the program, and then suffered damages when reasonable expectations were not borne out. Again the courts have been conservative believing that they would be besieged by similar suits from disenchanted students and parents and the public policy would therefore not be served.

A concept related to educational malpractice is that of educational exploitation, the use of students for their athletic skills without regard to their acquisition of academic skills. Often in these cases the courts have decided that there was indeed a duty owed, and damages have been awarded to the student.

But for the most part, claims of failure to educate have not been successful. Yet Weeks (1980) advises that the creation of new torts takes years and that educators should not become complacent over their apparent successes with previous litigation.

The 14th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution guarantees that all citizens be afforded "equal protection" under the law. "Equal quality", an extension of the equal protection clause, has been tested in the courts. Lepchenske (1975) believes this will continue and suggests that higher education, as it focuses on questions of quality, is due for a judicial confrontation on the matter. As a result, the curricula would likely be reevaluated to determine not only if they stimulate intellectual growth, but also if they contribute to the capacity of the whole person to function adequately in society. Certainly the mastery of the basic academic skills would play a significant role here. Sherman (1976) concludes that there is the possibility that every aspect of university policy could be challenged based on interpretations of civil rights laws. In light of this, colleges and universities need to be very much aware of possible litigation and of the impact of same to their decisions about curricular inclusions.

Ethical Concerns. In addition to the need for an institution to legally protect itself, there is also the need to act out of a sense of moral obligation to society. As already suggested, recruitment practices need to be monitored to assure that the campus is neither promising nor implying to prospective

students more than it can actually deliver. The same would naturally apply to advertisements and other printed matter assembled and distributed by the college or university. The institution that actively seeks to bring to campus those students who are underprepared for the rigors of college level course work does indeed have an ethical responsibility to provide an avenue for those individuals to succeed. To do otherwise is to prescribe failure for them.

Also, due to the fact that most colleges and universities are publicly funded, when making curricular decisions each campus must concern itself with the needs of the various constituencies that sustain it. It is important to determine the expectations of higher education's end product--the college graduate--not only by present day taxpayers, but also by those who will support it over the next twenty years. The public at large expects that students exiting from higher education will have acquired certain skills and competencies that will contribute to the well-being of the individual and the society. If students cannot hope to complete a college degree without bolstering of the basic academic skills, then obviously those skills must be acquired somewhere before more advanced academic challenges can be tackled.

Philosophic Concerns. Colleges and universities have a major role to play in deciding where students are going to acquire the basic academic skills. Each campus must draw its own conclusions guided by its own formal statement of mission. The

mission statement should define the institution's role within the local community and, in the larger context, within society. Its purposes and goals should point the way to the appropriate solution to the basic skills deficiency dilemma.

In defining its mission a campus must come to terms with several questions about the ultimate purposes of higher education. McPherson (1983) expounds on the questions summarized here:

- Is higher education to act as an initiator of social change? Is it to be more than an advocate for change; should it actually adopt an activist's role?
- Should higher education indeed assume responsibility for correcting the shortcomings of social institutions far wider in scope that have impacted the learner earlier in life?
- Is it the purpose of higher education to function as a social equalizer, doing all in its power to smooth out the inequalities society and history have handed down to individuals and to groups?
- Is it the role of higher education to remain aloof from subjectivity, to instead analyze and present opposing positions and refrain from passing judgment?

Such questions help to guide the campus as it assesses its objectives.

Higher education, Pallante (1978) has noted, always has included two elements. First, it has been a place where people improve, broaden, and refine their thinking to make it rational

and objective. It is a place where people conduct the search for truth. Second, it always has imparted social relevance through a process called "new mission". Previous new missions include the social reconstruction of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s. Pallante takes issue with those who contend that the teaching of basic skills has become higher education's latest new mission. Historically, higher education has been a place for higher studies. Basic skills education is not representative of higher learning. Subsequently, this new mission could destroy the continuity of higher education's historically defined intellectual tradition. Also, although the ivory tower cannot remain insulated from social problems, neither can it hope to cure them all without radically and irreversibly altering its traditional character.

Curricular decisions should be made in response to the institution's articulated statement of mission as they both fulfill and express its purposes. Scott (1981) reminds the reader that institutional goals are not static and must be monitored regularly:

> Activities which flow naturally from goals statements may atrophy, and counter activities may develop. The influences for change are great and result from both external and internal forces. External influences include the public, the media and the church, opportunities for graduates, new knowledge, and the activities of other

> colleges. Internal influences include academic departments and divisions, the president and deans, individual faculty members, students, and extracurriculum and what Benson Snyder at M.I.T. has called the 'hidden curriculum,' those powerful but unintended forces set to work by administrative and academic actions (p. 22).

Each campus must regularly review its mission statement to determine to what extent basic skills education is aligned with its particular goals.

The Responses

Concerns over the economic, academic, legal, ethical, and philosophical aspects of developmental education continue to affect many members of the academic community. Yet, despite the ongoing debate, a proactive response to the basic skills needs of undergraduates has been undertaken. Many campuses have created special courses designed to develop the skills level of entering students.

The learning objectives for these courses can vary greatly, but address one or more of the following domains: cognitive skills, study skills, language skills, and personal development. A review of the literature on basic skills courses and programs currently in place nationally revealed that the behavioral objectives set forth in these endeavors typically surpass the more general supposition that, as a result of the courses, one's ability to read, write or compute will be improved. The emphasis

is on the developmental and the corrective rather than merely the remedial. The notion of teaching for transfer predominates so that academic skills deficient students can learn how to learn the basic concepts that will be presented to them later on in other subject areas (Mallonee & Breihan, 1985, Snow & Brinton, 1984).

Cognitive Skills. This goal of learning how to learn is accomplished by concurrently teaching a set of "skills" with the academic content. These skills may be differently defined from one example to the next. A constantly recurring theme, however, is that of cognitive or learning skills. Many basic skills courses aim to improve the student's ability to acquire knowledge by honing the higher order thinking skills. These courses have the students practice reasoning, concept usage and problem solving techniques. It is not unusual to find the improvement of "logical skills" or "critical thinking skills" listed among course objectives (Clark, 1986, Johnson, 1984, Lazdowski, 1985).

Study Skills. Another set of skills frequently taught along with the academic content is that of study skills. Study skills generally are presented as a set of methods for organizing both information and time. They include suggestions for: effective listening so that lectures may be better understood; classroom note-taking techniques; outlining textbook chapters for review; test preparation strategies; test-taking techniques; following instructions; and time management (Ashmore, 1985, Dooley & Palamar, 1985, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication

Skills, 1985, Nelli & Minnis, 1986). Sometimes library skills are included under this umbrella, although specific courses in maximizing effective use of library resources are not that unusual to find.

Language Skills. One would expect that courses in basic language skills would aim to improve reading rates and comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and writing style. Frequently, these courses also attempt to improve oral communication skills or interpersonal skills with the presumption that these are critical to success in interactive classrooms. When language skills courses are comprised of students whose primary language is other than English, attention may be paid to the ethnicity of the learner through the inclusion of material having relevance to the particular culture (Snow & Brinton, 1984).

Personal Development. Frequent reference is made to the application of psychological principles to basic skills students for the purpose of reconditioning attitudes and behavior. Efforts are made not only to change negative attitudes toward the subject matter, but also to develop positive attitudes toward learning, self-discipline, and personal responsibility (Lazdowski, 1985, Morris, 1984). If inner motivation can be stimulated, these students are believed to become more self-directed. In the process many basic skills courses aim to increase the individual's confidence in his or her own ability to develop proficiency in an academic area. Some courses take this

one step further and teach students how to apply their newly acquired basic skills to the career planning process (Beiswenger, 1986).

The methodologies employed in developmental courses are quite varied. Innovative materials (Koeppel, 1984) and teaching methods (Olson, 1984) are often used (particularly in the freshman and sophomore years) to maximize affective learning. Computer-assisted instruction (Arms, 1986, Hynd, et al, 1986), team teaching, peer counseling (Forristall-Brown & Brown, 1985), small group work, individualized instruction (Christ, 1985), and learning contracts (Ficklin, et al, 1985) are cited as useful basic skills teaching methods. Techniques for mastery learning are also commonly reported, although there is some concern that these focus students too narrowly and do not enhance their ability to generalize to a larger domain (Handleman, 1977).

Campus "learning centers" often serve as a focal point for underprepared students. These are places where some type of tutorial assistance is typically available. If the courses are not actually coordinated and/or taught out of these centers, their presence nonetheless signals that the institution has made a commitment to provide support services to the skills deficient student (Bates, 1984, Shakespeare, 1986).

Conclusions

When a campus has reconciled itself to the need to provide basic skills instruction to students, it must then make some decisions as to specifically what will be taught, how it will be

taught, and who will teach it. Even with the endorsement of the campus' governing bodies, however, problems related to the operation of basic skills programs are likely to arise.

Smith (1980) reports on behalf of a group of educators who made on-site visits to several campuses with basic skills programs in place. They noted five important problems with the programs they reviewed. The first is one of coordination. Often, campus offerings of this type can develop independently of each other. In order to more efficiently utilize resources, campuses would do well to organize their diverse efforts into a more coherent system.

Another problem is that of scale. Although basic skills programs can demonstrate their ability to increase college student persistence (Forristall-Brown & Brown, 1985, Lazdowski, 1985), they typically do not reach all the students who could benefit from them. This may be more of a problem of magnitude than of fiscal impossibility in that there is concern that small size, proven programs may lose their effectiveness if implemented on a larger scale.

A third problem is that there is always opposition present. Seldom does an institution willingly undertake these programs. And, there is often the supposition that developmental education is tantamount to a departure from quality rather than an avenue toward it.

Fourth, the collection of student performance data needs to be stressed. This not only justifies funding requests, it also establishes credibility of the programs and their personnel. The importance of data collection and analysis can not be overstated.

Finally, very often the basic skills programs operate peripherally to the academic community, relegating the developmental education student (and faculty/staff worker) to a second class status (Shakespeare, 1986). Suggestions for overcoming this stigma include placing basic skills programs within the auspices of the campus' academic affairs division, combining the teaching of basic skills with subject matter in specially designed courses, and assuring that faculty teach both basic skills and content as a part of their work load.

Higher education's struggle to reconcile historic tradition with contemporary problems is perhaps no more poignantly illustrated than in the case of basic skills education. The inherent contradictions compel each campus to wrestle with the issues described and to determine how to combat the deficiencies. For some the inclusion of basic skills curriculum is endorsed as a stopgap measure. For others the solution lies in the development of a more influential relationship with elementary and secondary schools (Lewes, 1985). Such cooperative endeavors can help to assure that children are indeed acquiring basic academic skills as they move through the early years of their education experience and that advancement to the next grade level is dependent upon such skills acquisition. Only when that is

assured will the basic skills in higher education phenomenon finally have run its course.

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