Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Pipeline or Pipedream: Another Way to Think about Basic Skills

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Abstract: A candid assessment of the challenges that community colleges face in educating students in basic skills.

Essay:

If I asked you—as an educated adult—what you remember about learning to read or to do basic arithmetic, you might recall some fleeting images: being read to by a parent or studying a book with big letters and pictures at your school desk. But by now these skills have become part of who we are and how we see the world. In this way literacy and "numeracy" have become automatic and essentially invisible to us, so second-nature that we don't really understand how someone could have trouble learning something so simple.

But for a significant group of college students these seemingly simple skills are opaque. Although the problem is widespread throughout higher education, it is especially vexing in community colleges. According to data from the Education Commission of the States, 76 percent of all institutions that enroll freshmen offer at least one remedial reading, writing or mathematics course, and these classes are offered at 98 percent of community colleges. When these students arrive on campus, they take a battery of tests—often without realizing that these assessments will seriously affect which classes they are allowed to take. The results place large numbers of first-time students (according to information on the American Association of Community Colleges' Web site, up to 80 percent) in English and mathematics classes that are below—sometimes *way* below—college level. Facing a long series of "catch-up" courses, only a small percentage of these students ever make it to college-level work and thus to the opportunities that come with higher education.

Some background about pre-collegiate education at college may be useful here: Originally such programs were designed to reacquaint returning adults with skills that had become rusty over time; what was needed was a "refresher" where they could relearn things they had previously learned in high school. Today, pre-collegiate courses are more likely to be populated by students recently out of high school where, in fact, they never mastered these essential skills of English and math. Many of these students have had years of negative experiences with school and need courses in which they can, in effect, more successfully learn the content and learn to be students. Over the years, the jargon for such courses has changed: from remedial, to basic skills, developmental education, and pre-collegiate education.

What has not changed much is the teaching. The apparent simplicity of the skills in question seems to provoke a simplistic pedagogy: if students don't understand it, say it louder, say it slower! Too often, that is, basic skills courses are taught through drill and memorization of rules. What's missing is any sign of intellectual vitality and engagement, the very things that draw many teachers into their academic fields.

This kind of pedagogy presents (at least) two problems. One is boredom. Repetition and practice are good things, but memorization and drill without a connection to big ideas can frustrate students and teachers both. One doesn't become a writer or reader only by learning grammatical rules, and memorizing a mathematical formula does not alone lead to the kinds of quantitative literacy that is needed today. More to the point, this kind of mind-numbing approach is not necessary. Even at the most fundamental levels of English and mathematics, intellectually engaging problems and issues exist. With a balance of challenge and support, students can engage in lively, authentic debate and intellectual exchange.

But the second problem is the deeper one: these so-called "basic skills" are not, in fact, so basic or simple. As the research on literacy shows, the reading process that most of us take so much for granted is highly complex. As we "decode" a text, we bring to bear a vast reservoir of linguistic and cultural knowledge, connecting new ideas with old ones, figuring out words we may not know, actively questioning what we read as we read it, trying out and refining ideas and conclusions as we read.

The long-term solution to the problem of under-preparation and student failure must be systemic, addressing alignment of curriculum and assessment across the educational sectors. Students who completed their high school mathematics requirements in tenth grade, for example, may not have seen a math problem for two years before taking a college placement test. In that time, all Xs and Ys may have vanished from their minds. Students in high school English classes may focus on literature, but in college they are assessed on composition and rhetoric.

Even as a long-term solution is required, however, the pre-collegiate classroom needs attention now. A different and better way to think about teaching "basic skills" depends on remembering what is actually entailed in successful reading, writing and problem solving—and making the complexity of those processes visible for students so that they

can develop strategies for improvement. This means being explicit with students about the assumptions and processes that have become automatic for most of us. It means creating a learning environment where students learn about themselves as learners and develop strategies for success.

And of course it means that leadership is needed. While an individual faculty member can choose to make these approaches characteristic of her classroom—and the Carnegie Foundation is lucky enough to be working with some of these incredibly thoughtful faculty members—the chances of student success greatly increase when campus leaders make pre-collegiate education a campus-wide priority: when the administration takes pride in these successes, when faculty work together to create challenging pre-collegiate programs that are more than a collection of courses. Others on campus have important roles to contribute to student success, as well: tutors, counselors, institutional researchers and student peers.

The ideal of college access for all is essential to the mission of community colleges. The challenge is turning it into success. If this mission is to be real and not just a pipedream, pre-collegiate programs must be a pipeline where students who have not thrived in their K-12 educational experiences can learn and succeed.

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