

Advances in Online Developmental Education: An Accelerated, Synchronous Approach at Rasmussen College

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Driven by faculty-based action research, redesigned residential and online courses, and changes to placement testing, Rasmussen College increased its developmental education pass rates by double digits while decreasing the number and percentage of students who require remedial coursework. Like many institutions of higher education, Rasmussen College prioritizes developmental education given its impact on new-student experience, graduation, and overall institutional health. In 2012, the college committed to an overhaul of developmental education in an effort to improve outcomes. At the time, Rasmussen College's developmental education experience included four courses into which student were placed through examination: 1) integrated reading and writing, 2) pre-algebra, 3) intermediate algebra, and 4) geometry. Pass rates fluctuated by term, but often hovered around 50percent, meaning the other half of the student population were either failing or withdrawing. This required reform.

Rasmussen College is a regionally-accredited college founded in 1900 near Saint Paul, Minnesota. A career-focused, baccalaureate institution, Rasmussen College offers online, on-ground, and blended courses, though most of its learning seats—including approximately 85 percent of those in developmental education coursework—are online. Thus, the challenge was not only to improve the developmental education experience, but to do so in a largely online environment.

Characteristics of Change: Changes in Placement and Assessment

First, Rasmussen College improved how students were placed into developmental education. In addition to its entrance placement assessment, which measured prospective students' abilities in writing, reading, and mathematics, Rasmussen College implemented test waivers based on prior college success in mathematics and English. Students earning C grades or higher in college-level mathematics and/or English courses prior to enrolling at Rasmussen College are eligible to waive the corresponding portion of the assessment, thus eliminating the possibility of developmental education double jeopardy. From 2012 to 2014, this new policy and other factors reduced the college's remediation seat total by 13 percent while the persistence of new Rasmussen College students remained steady.

Developmental Education faculty were, and remain, the cornerstone of our remediation successes. Beyond classroom delivery, faculty led the design of Rasmussen College's remediation courses. Crucially, faculty also met weekly with the Dean of the School of General and Developmental Education to share positive and negative trends they were seeing in their classrooms. With the assistance of an instructional designer, the dean and faculty were able to make swift changes to the course designs in the vein of action research, which uses ongoing assessment and action to improve outcomes.

Acceleration

Since 2011, a growing body of literature has emerged from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and other organizations which supports the effectiveness of accelerated developmental education. Given these data, and support of faculty designing the courses, Rasmussen College chose to accelerate its new developmental education courses. Under this new structure, students would complete their developmental education courses in roughly half the time needed to complete non-remedial courses. Despite this acceleration, the number of contact hours, and the amount of content and assessment did not decrease.

STUDENT QUOTES

"I am one who hated math because I couldn't understand it. I came into this class with the attitude that I was going to fail and have to retake the class. I am SO amazed that my average is in the 90s and I have even gotten a score of 100 on a test! I really amazed myself! Just take plenty of notes so that you can go back and look at examples and how to do the problems."

"The demonstrations really help. There is still a lot I don't get, but with these videos I am beginning to understand."

Achieving this balance between acceleration and a positive, yet appropriately challenging, new student experience required a new model for accelerated course design: Rasmussen College's model is a confluence of synchronous learning, formative assessment, media-rich demonstrations, and student voice.

Synchronous Learning

Given the high percentage of students who complete their developmental learning online at Rasmussen College, the new course design placed significant weight on mandatory synchronous, collaborative learning. Students participate in live online sessions between one and three hours' duration, during which faculty facilitate exploration of the week's content. This provides a space in which online students can practice, make mistakes, receive encouragement, and collaborate with faculty and peers. Students taking their developmental education courses in residential or blended settings rely on their in-person time for this collaboration.

Formative Assessment and Media

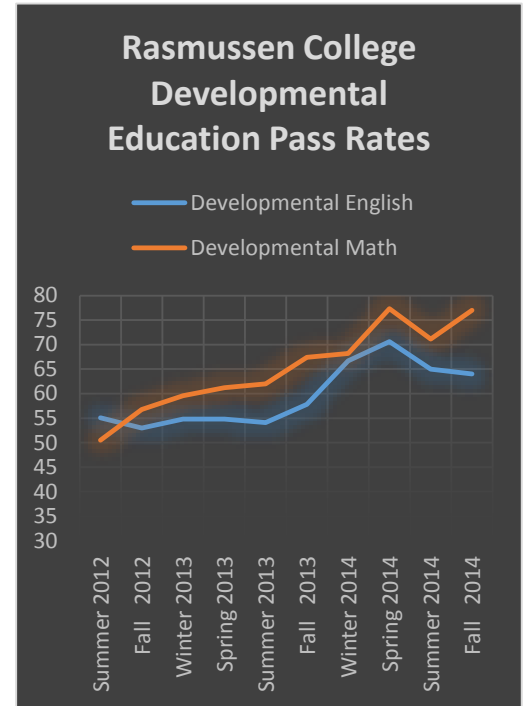
Additionally, students in the new developmental education courses are provided with asynchronous, faculty-built media. Students in the developmental mathematics courses participate in weekly discussion forums by first watching recordings of faculty working through problems on an online white board. Faculty sometimes solve the problem correctly and occasionally make "mistakes" which students are asked to consider. Students then reflect on the process and apply. In developmental English, students are provided a series of ungraded, media-rich, low-stakes formative assessments leading up to summative assessments.

Motivational Framework

Shortly after the new courses were launched, despite some increased success rates among engaged students, Rasmussen College faculty continued to see disengaged developmental education students failing and withdrawing. This was deemed our *Zero Trend*, meaning multiple zeroes in a student's gradebook often trended toward their failure. In an attempt to increase engagement, all developmental courses were adjusted to highlight student inclusion characteristics. The literature which drove this effort was *Diversity & Motivation: Culturally Responsive Teaching in College* by Ginsburg and Wlodkowski (2009). In it, the authors posit that when four key characteristics—*inclusion, meaning, attitude, and competence*—are present in the design and delivery of college courses, adults are more motivated to learn and persist.

Examples of this motivational design include asking students to discuss their path to college in our synchronous online classrooms, addressing *inclusion*. English students write about a person in their lives with whose decisions they disagree. Building *attitude*, they are asked to think critically about why they disagree and offer preferred outcomes. In developmental mathematics, our students build *meaning* and *competence* by solving mathematics problems in backward fashion, then consider other problems in their lives or communities which could also be solved backwards.

While, as you see, pass rates have increased, the college is still gathering data on the Motivational Framework's impact on our *Zero Trend*. Rasmussen College remains focused on continuous improvement of its developmental education experience, utilizing student data and faculty feedback to improve student learning outcomes. Despite the considerable changes in 2012 to an accelerated, partially synchronous online learning experience, our student success has grown out of quality course design consistently vetted and improved by faculty engaged in action research. This model has not only benefitted our students and courses, but is also conducive to faculty acclimation to non-traditional course design and delivery.



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