

# Fostering Professional Growth: Models to Support Developmental Educators

By Erin Severs



When asked by the Kellogg Institute to design a project that would improve Mohawk Valley Community College's (MVCC) developmental instruction, I immediately thought back on my own experiences as a new developmental writing instructor. I also thought about what incredible opportunities I have had as a full time instructor and how much my first experiences with professional development have truly enriched and enhanced my teaching and my understanding of how what I do impacts the larger picture of student success. Then I thought about how much easier those early years could have been with more support and training, particularly in working with developmental students. Lastly I thought about the environment of MVCC and how the college fosters and encourages new ideas and initiatives.

In this project, Alex Haines-Stephen and I looked at the issue of professional development specific to developmental education and particularly addressed the challenges of providing professional development for adjunct faculty, who make up the majority of those who teach developmental coursework. Though in 2015, 47% of developmental courses at MVCC were taught by full time faculty (placing us above national averages), there were only 9 full time faculty teaching these courses compared with 34 adjunct faculty. With these factors in mind, we collaborated on designing a set of workshops and seminars that would meet multiple times per year covering a variety of topics including the history of developmental education; the needs, challenges, and strengths of developmental students; best practices in developmental writing and math classes; and the relationship between instructor learning styles and how they affect teaching. The driving question behind this project was, "What do I wish someone had told me before I taught my first developmental course?"

The bulk of the literature that we applied in designing this project fell into one of three categories: literature about the importance of professional development in developmental education, literature addressing types of and adjunct access to professional development, and literature addressing specific case studies of successful professional development geared toward adjuncts. Boylan, Bonham, and White (1999) stated that, "successful developmental education efforts are delivered by those who are well aware of the nature and needs of developmental students and the techniques that contribute to their learning." This basic idea was at the heart of all our research and activity for this project.

Another idea that was central to our work was the concept of the "knowledge gap." "For many faculty, the knowledge they gained in their graduate programs is significantly different from the knowledge they need to teach developmental classes" (Kozeracki, 2005, p. 42). For example, in the field of English, it is incredibly common for graduate work to focus on in-depth literary studies with very little time, if any, spent discussing pedagogy, classroom

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management and assessment strategies, or techniques with which to teach grammar and other basic writing skills. Boroch et al. (2010) also discussed how college faculty must operate both within the professional domain of their specialized content area and also that of education. They expressed that professional development could act as a bridge between specific disciplinary content and teaching that content to students. Clearly, professional development is a key means to bridging this knowledge gap.

Likewise, Mina Shaughnessy (1976) stressed the importance of what she calls "teacher development" and suggests that developmental education in particular needs a shift away from a focus on student deficiency to a focus on student ability and teacher growth. Her ideas about teachers progressing from "guarding the tower" to "diving in" were reexamined by Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano (1991). They stated that this teacher progression requires a questioning of assumptions and a reframing of how educators see students, a process which does not necessarily happen naturally within a teacher's career; however, this process can absolutely be fostered within the structuring of professional development.

Our research also found that nationally, somewhere around two-thirds of developmental courses in community colleges are taught by adjunct faculty. These instructors have worked on a contracted class by class basis, for around half the pay of their full time colleagues, with no benefits or job security and often limited involvement in or connection to the college. In addition to this, they were rarely eligible for support to attend conferences and often lacked the opportunity to informally learn from the experiences of their full-time colleagues due to lack of office space and limited time on campus. Schmidt

(2012) has suggested that negative working environments for adjunct faculty can get in the way of providing the best possible education to students.

Though there are many different types of professional development ranging from conference attendance to informal hallway conversations among colleagues. However, Boroch et al. (2010) call for an increase of professional development that is internal, stems directly from self-determined faculty needs, and represents a sustained effort that is clearly linked to the mission of the college. Further, if faculty take ownership of professional development it can be less expensive and more effective by encouraging interaction and discussion among colleagues (Kozeracki, 2005). In particular such professional development is far more accessible to adjunct faculty and it tends to foster greater interaction and discussion among colleagues. Boylan (2009) also has encouraged online training programs, providing incentives for adjuncts who take part in training, and furnishing manuals consisting of tools and techniques for working with developmental students as effective and inexpensive methods for making professional development accessible to adjunct instructors.

Lastly, we looked at a book chapter by Wallin (2007) which examined successful professional development programs for adjunct faculty. She discussed three specific programs which provided models for what we designed for MVCC.

## Professional Development Program

Between the knowledge gap that is present for many college instructors and the rising importance of developmental education, it is crucial that faculty are given opportunities to increase their knowledge, inform their practices, and connect with colleagues. We designed a formal “Developmental Education Institute” for adjuncts and new faculty teaching developmental courses which included 10 hours of training and workshops spread throughout the semester. The program didn’t quite come together as we had planned, but we did (and continue to) implement the more general strategy of including developmental education in the professional development offered at MVCC. Our primary goals in these sessions were to increase the effectiveness of adjuncts and full-time faculty teaching developmental coursework and to facilitate communication and connection among the faculty members.

### Program Features

Using the best practices for professional development, we designed sessions led by faculty and offered on campus. In the pursuit of the practicum goals, we developed the following list of some of the objectives and topics we identified as important to include:

- determining faculty knowledge of developmental education and dispelling myths;
- explaining the placement process;
- administering learning and teaching inventories to all developmental faculty;
- discussing characteristics of developmental learners;
- presenting a variety of best practices for working with developmental students;
- increasing communication and collaboration among faculty; and
- focusing on discipline-specific practices, such as:
  - discussing teaching and assessment techniques applicable to mathematics,

- familiarizing faculty to the Hawke’s Learning System and the resources it can provide for developmental math courses,
- reviewing the recent changes in developmental math course design and administration,
- familiarizing faculty with developmental and college level writing,
- discussing assessment methods and effective feedback on written work,
- utilizing John Langan’s *English Skills* and the “four bases of good writing” as a classroom resource and framework of approach, and
- facilitating the use of personal writing in the classroom as a technique of connecting new skills to prior knowledge and experience and as a method of empowering developmental writers.

This list ultimately resulted in the design of two different sessions related to developmental education in general and two sessions which were discipline specific (one for writing and one for math). An important feature of all of these sessions was that they included group activity and participant involvement. This feature was important not only to better facilitate learning but also to model some of the best practices for developmental education.

### Program Implementation

We quickly realized that it would be best, at least getting started, to work

within the professional development programs previously established at MVCC. These programs break down into three major parts. As a part of a larger improvement initiative for adjuncts which included hiring an Adjunct Coordinator, a full-day adjunct orientation has been implemented at the start of each semester. Another form of professional development is the New Faculty Institute (NFI). This institute meets once a month for an afternoon, is obligatory for all new full-time faculty and optional for all new adjunct faculty, and covers a variety of topics ranging from pedagogy to college services. There are also college-wide institutes that take place four times a year. They consist of between 1 and 2 full days of 75 minute break-out sessions regarding a wide range of professional and casual topics with between five and eight options per time slot along with additional 2- and 4-hour sessions often offered on a second or third day. These institutes are free of cost, open to all faculty and staff, and are a wonderful opportunity for colleagues to learn from one another and from guest-speakers. The Developmental Education Institute sessions were integrated into these existing MVCC programs.

We still hope to eventually create the stand-alone Developmental Education Institute and particularly to provide some sort of incentive for adjunct faculty attendance but have found success in offering our four sessions as part of the four annual Institutes and presenting one session as part of NFI. We hope to start running our sessions with greater consistency and in particular hope to become a regular part of the NFI program offered to new faculty at the college. In 2015, 52% of new students tested into one or more developmental courses, so even faculty who will never teach a developmental course will still ultimately teach developmental students. This makes the information we present relevant to all faculty.

### Faculty Feedback

Overall, we were pleased with the outcomes of this project. Faculty who attended the sessions expressed that they had gained new approaches or attitudes that they wanted to adopt in their classrooms such as working to

address affective elements, getting to know students as individuals with strengths and talents, showing more compassion, and “envisioning all students as potential graduates, even when it’s frustrating!” Participants also expressed enjoying the opportunity to discuss classroom strategies with other faculty and to “share the good stuff” with one another.

### Conclusion

Meeting the needs of underprepared students and supporting the faculty who do this work are only going to continue to be more central to the success of higher education in this country. With more and more students testing into developmental courses, and an unfortunately low completion rate for these students (25% complete a degree within eight years of starting college according to Michael Collins from *Jobs For the Future*), I can see nothing more vital than work which improves the practice of educators working with underrepresented student groups, with the ultimate goal of improving the success of all students. Professional development in general and our practicum project in specific are powerful methods by which this goal can be accomplished.

This paper was written as a summary of the full practicum report by Erin Severs and Alex Haines-Stephan (2012). With changes in best practices and changes in politics, the original goals that motivated this

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paper have shifted to some extent. At this point, we, along with numerous other colleges, are pushing toward placing more students in credit-bearing courses with better support. As this process moves forward, it becomes more important than ever to train faculty to assist a wide spectrum of students to be successful.

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