Kathy Stein

Meeting the Needs of Developmental Latino/Latina Students

I admit it. As conscientious and well intentioned as I know myself to be, I don't believe that I have been meeting the needs of my developmental students, most of whom are Latino. As a white, middle-aged, female developmental educator, I am aware of our cultural differences. I have tried telling myself that when teaching developmental English, what matters is my knowledge of English composition. Good organization, solid development, and accurate mechanics do not change, regardless of the race, culture, or home language of my students. I have come to believe that expertise in our content fields and respect for our students is merely a starting point. Leaders in developmental education have concurred that multiculturalism must become part of the curriculum of developmental education (Lundell & Higbee, 2002). For a growing number of developmental educators, that multicultural curriculum must meet the needs of Latino students.

The Census 2000 Report strongly brought home the point that the demographics of our nation are changing. And in 2002, for the first time, "the Hispanic population became the largest minority in the United States" (U.S. Census Bureau, "People: Race and Ethnicity," 2003, p.1). This is true for Texas, too, where I have lived and worked for my entire professional career. I have a personal interest in Texas demographics, especially when the Census Bureau tells us that states like Texas are the demographic wave of the future. In Texas, according to the 2000 census, the percentage of White non-Hispanics dropped to 52.4% of the population. African Americans made up 12.0% and Latinos constituted 32% of all Texans (Texas State Data Center, 2004).

In response to the declining number of Texans enrolling in higher

education, the state developed a comprehensive initiative called *Closing the Gaps* (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board THECB, 2001). This initiative has identified the need to increase by 2015 "the number of degrees, certificates and other identifiable student successes from high quality programs" (p. 2). The goal is to increase the overall number of bachelor's degrees, associate's degrees, and certificates awarded from 95,000 in 2001 to 163,000 by 2015. Unfortunately, efforts to reach Latino students have been unsuccessful. The *Closing the Gaps by 2015: 2004 Progress Report* states: "White and Black student participation targets for 2005 have been met. White participation increased dramatically, a trend which helps the state achieve the overall participation rate, but masks the shortfall in Hispanic enrollment growth" (THECB, 2004a, July, p. 5).

At my institution, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the student population averages around 70% Latino (University of Texas at El Paso, 2004), and approximately 60% of students enter UTEP requiring at least one developmental education course (THECB, 2004b). At UTEP we found that students who completed our two-course Developmental English sequence performed more successfully in their first college-level composition course than did students who tested straight into the first-year composition program. Data such as this pleased us; it showed that we were doing our jobs well. However, the data also showed that within any given cohort of students, approximately two-thirds did not complete the Developmental English sequence within a two-year period. In many cases, a fourth to a third of the students in a Developmental English section disappeared before the end of the semester. Sadly, this pattern is in keeping with national statistics that showed that only 29% of Latino developmental students at four-year public institutions are retained long enough to achieve a degree (Boylan, Saxon, White, & Erwin, 1994).

Why? The data from my institution showed that our students were academically capable of achieving the standards set for them in Developmental English and that the standards were sufficiently challenging for them to compete successfully in the college-level composition course. Yet many of our students were not choosing to stick around long enough to show us what they could do. The students who successfully completed the course had the same range of placement test scores as those who did not successfully complete the course. Might there not be social or cultural components contributing to the disappearance of these students that have nothing to do with their ability to learn to write in the university environment? Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham (1993) came to similar conclusions. They found that there "were few statistically

significant differences in the admission of white students and students of color participating in developmental programs at the same type of institution" (p. 3). They go on to suggest that "differences in retention are the result of some combination of institutional characteristics and the developmental and/or psycho-social attributes of students of color" (p. 3). Perhaps the "institutional characteristics" that they refer to should include institutional training of developmental faculty in understanding the psycho-social attributes of Latino students.

Ybarra (2001) asked why are students of color over-represented in developmental education courses and why are Latinos so dramatically over-represented in Developmental English classes? Ybarra suggests that part of the problem might lie in a dissonance "between the cultural backgrounds and corresponding thought processes of Latino students in the learning environment in the composition classroom" (p. 39). Perhaps part of the problem is a lack of multicultural knowledge on the part of developmental educators. When a disproportionate number of students are of a different race, ethnicity, and/or culture from that of their instructors, who are generally White, then we have to assume that any previous experience with institutionalized racism, stereotyping, and sheer lack of faith in their abilities has to come with them.

Learning how to honor and include the social literacies of Latinos in particular is of even greater necessity now. In a nation where race and ethnicity issues have traditionally been viewed from a Black and White perspective, the ongoing change in demographics has acted as a wake up call to many educational researchers and forcefully brought home to many the fact that the racial component of multicultural education is multifaceted and not simply biracial. We can no longer work off the false paradigm of believing that by researching what works for the White student or for the African American student will by some sort of default work for Latino students just because they are "minorities."

While there exists great disparity among students identified as "Latino," a preliminary study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (Immerwahr, 2003) showed that many of the Latino students they studied came from low-income families and "seemed poorly prepared academically" (p. vi) for college. In addition, Erickson (1987) stated that many times Latino students who show up in our classrooms have faced for years the assumption that they are low performers and not as intelligent as other students. When they then find themselves testing into a Developmental English classroom, their worst fears about themselves are negatively reinforced.

In addition, many Latino students face the challenge of language acquisition. Custred (2002) makes the point that failure to ensure mastery

of the "standard" language of American society will "deprive minorities of the tools necessary for productive entry into the economy and thus into society as a whole" (p. 237). Yet the privileging of Standard American English in the Developmental English classroom may inadvertently reinforce a sense of not being considered "good" enough or of having a lower "castelike status" (p. 225), as Ogbu (1978) hypothesized. The White instructor may have no conscious intention of making her students feel less capable or worthy, but her very Whiteness in conjunction with her perceived mastery of Standard American English may create a learning situation that is hostile to Latino students. Torres, Winston, & Cooper (2003) stated that trying to balance what society privileges (in this case, Standard American English) with the language and comfort zone of family and culture "can produce acculturative stress" (p. 154). How many developmental instructors are aware of this conflict in our students?

In trying to find a theoretical construct for why so many intellectually bright and socially competent young Latinos fail to successfully complete Developmental English at my institution, I come to an impasse. As Chung and Brothen (2003) summarized, developmental educators have promoted practice over theory. A theory deficit exists in the field. For example, composition instructors turn to composition theory in putting together lesson plans, but we see little evidence of research that asks how composition theory, in general, applies to the Developmental English classroom in the specific. And it would seem that any developmental education theory for use in classrooms where the students are predominantly Latino would need to draw from the strengths of a variety of theoretical approaches that have already been created in different fields.

For instance, Latino Student Identity work done by Torres (2003) as it applies to transitional issues for our students should be incorporated along with some basic understanding of the tenets of multicultural education as laid out by Banks and Banks (2001) or by Nieto (2004). And the differentiations that Martinez (1994) delineated among border Latinos in his work might prove helpful in developing this theoretical framework that could be used for creating more welcoming and comfortable Developmental English classrooms.

Those of us who teach developmental students must understand that we have to do more than teach content material if we want our students to be successful. Our good intentions and heartfelt desire for students to succeed are insufficient in the face of the number of our students who are not graduating from our institutions. If we are serious about retaining Latino developmental students, then we must train developmental educators in strategies that allow them to celebrate, endorse, respect, and internalize that which is specific to Latino populations.

References

Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of research on multicultural education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Boss.

Boylan, H. R., Bliss, L. B., & Bonham, B. S. (1993). The performance of minority students in developmental education. *Research in Developmental Education, 10*(2), 1-4.

Boylan, H. R., Saxon, D. P., White, J. R., Erwin, A. (1994). Retaining minority students through developmental education. *Research in Developmental Education, 11*(3), 1-4.

Chung, C., & Brothen, T. (2002). Some final thoughts on theoretical perspectives—over lunch. In D. B. Lundell & J. L. Higbee (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second Meeting on Future Directions in Developmental Education* (pp. 39-44). Retrieved September 24, 2004, from the University of Minnesota, General College, Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy Web site: *http://www.gen.umn.edu/research/crdeul/pdf/proceedings/2-proceedings.pdf*

Custred, G. (2002). The primacy of standard language in modern education. *American Behavioral Scientist, 34,* 232-239.

Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 18,* 335-356.

Immerwahr, J. (2003, June). *With diploma in hand: Hispanic high school seniors talk about their future.* Retrieved September 21, 2004, from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education Web site: *http://www.highereducation.org/reports/hispanic/hispanic.pdf*

Lundell, D. B., & Higbee, J. L. (2002). Proceedings of the second meeting on future directions in developmental education. Retrieved September 24, 2004, from the University of Minnesota, General College, Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy Web site: *http://www.gen.umn.edu/research/crdeul/pdf/proceedings/2-proceedings.pdf*

Martinez, O. J. (1994). *Border people: Life and society in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education.* Boston: Pearson.

Ogbu, J. U. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective.* New York: Academic Press.

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2001). *Closing the gaps: Texas higher education plan.* Retrieved October 30, 2004, from *http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/cfsbin/archfetch.cfm?DocID=3798&Format=PDF*

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2004a, July). *Closing the gaps by 2015: 2004 progress report.* Retrieved March 7, 2005, from *http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/ClosingTheGaps/*

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2004b, August). *Texas public universities' data and performance report: Part a.* Retrieved October 30, 2004, from *http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/pdf/0759A.pdf*

Texas State Data Center & Office of the State Demographer. (2004, April 20). *Census 2000 of demographic profiles*. Retrieved July 25, 2005, from *http://txsdc.utsa.edu/data/census/2000/dp2_4/pdf/*

Torres, V. (2003). Influences on ethnic identity development of Latino college students in the first two years of college. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*, 532-547.

Torres, V., Winston, R. B., & Cooper, D. L. (2003). Hispanic American students' cultural orientation: Does geographic location, institutional type, or level of stress have an effect? *NASPA Journal, 40*, 153-72.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2003, October 16). *People: Race and ethnicity.* Retrieved October 30, 2004, from *http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/saff/SAFFInfo.jsp?_pageId=tp9_race_ethnicity*

University of Texas at El Paso. (2004). *University fact page: Fall 2003.* Retrieved March 7, 2005, from *http://cierp.utep.edu/reports/fp_03_04/FPUniversity03_04.htm*

Ybarra, R. (2001). Cultural dissonance in basic writing courses. *Journal of Basic Writing, 20,* 37-52.

Kathy K. Stein *is the Director of the Tutoring and Learning Center at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). She is also a doctoral student in UTEP's Educational Leadership and Foundations program. Her current research interests are the learning styles of developmental students and student development theory as it applies to developmental students and especially to students of color. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathy K. Stein, Library 300/TLC, 500 W. University, UTEP, El Paso, TX 79968, (915) 747-5335. E-mail:* kstein@utep.edu.