Relentless Leader's Focus on Developmental Education: An Interview with Byron McClenney

By Hunter R. Boylan

Ongoing efforts to establish and maintain consistency between exit standards for developmental courses and entry standards for college-level courses are critical.

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Dr. Byron McClenney is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Educational Administration and serves on the staff of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas – Austin as Project Director for Achieving the Dream. He recently retired as the President of Kingsborough College in New York City and was previously the President of the Community College of Denver. As President of the Community College of Denver he established developmental education as a priority, particularly as a means of promoting success for minority students. By the end of the 1990s, the Community College of Denver was regarded as one of the best community colleges in the country and its successes in developmental education are considered to represent an ideal to which all other community colleges aspired.

Hunter Boylan (H.B.): As President of the Community College of Denver (CCD) you made serving underprepared students an institutional priority, emphasized planning for excellence in developmental education, and promoted data driven decision-making. The results you obtained, particularly with minority students, are legendary. What were some of the most important factors in obtaining these results?

Byron McClenney (B.M.): The first step was and still is the decision that it is not reasonable for there to be gaps in attainment between groups on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. As we did in Denver starting in 1986, an institution needs to develop baseline data against which to make comparisons in subsequent years. If a majority of entering students require remediation, and if minority students are disproportionally represented in those ranks, then establishing a goal to close the gaps seems like an imperative.

I have always talked about a goal to ensure that students who come underprepared for college-level work should be able to graduate and transfer at rates at least as high as those who come fully prepared. That outcome was actually achieved in the last cohort we were tracking before my retirement in 2000. An earlier target focused on performance in college-level courses following completion of the developmental sequence.

The annual planning process provided the mechanism for establishing college priorities and then allocating or reallocating resources to support the necessary interventions. That effort was always led by a representative Planning Council which recommended no more than five "Action Priorities" for the next year in the life of the college. Items bringing focus on student success, diversity, professional development, and the appropriate uses of technology were always on the list.

The faculty and staff members (full and part time) who work with developmental students need to be deeply committed to the work. This is not an appropriate placement for inexperienced faculty members who have no preparation for working with underprepared students.

I frequently stressed the need for a "high tech and high touch" approach to delivery. The appropriate uses of computers and tutors capture the main idea here. That idea, along with a desire to help students make early connections with faculty and other students, drove much of the effort to improve practice.

H.B.: I had the pleasure of listening to you speak at Achieving the Dream Conferences in New Mexico and Florida and heard you talk about the necessity of having a "relentless focus" on developmental education. What exactly do you mean by a "relentless focus"? How can administrators develop and maintain that focus?

B.M.: It begins with the recognition that developmental education is a program to be attended to, whether the effort is centralized or not. The careful coordination of the various units involved in the delivery of courses and support services is essential. I have been on campuses where the faculty teaching the various developmental courses did not even know each other. Not only must they know each other, they must work on a regular basis with the support services

personnel to achieve a cohesive effort.

Ongoing efforts to establish and maintain consistency between exit standards for developmental courses and entry standards for college-level courses are critical. That obviously implies clarity around the standards or competencies required for all courses. It also assumes that developmental faculty meet on a regular basis with college-level faculty in related disciplines. This process can be facilitated most effectively in across-the-curriculum discussions in writing, computation, computing, and critical thinking.

Given the previously mentioned ideas, the planning process can bring the focus needed to bring action to this agenda. In addition, the annual review of performance data can be utilized by a leader to emphasize what is most important.

H.B.: Why do some community colleges embrace developmental education and do their best to make it work whereas others either try to ignore it or consign it to the "back burner"? Some community college leaders make public statements in support of developmental education, allocate appropriate resources for it, and make it a point to hire the best faculty available to teach developmental courses. Others rarely make mention of developmental education, do not include the needs of developmental education in budget planning, and hire whoever is available with minimal qualifications to teach developmental courses.

B.M.: After years of scratching and clawing for acceptance, recognition, and affirmation in higher education, many are simply afraid of being known as remedial institutions. On the other hand, I have argued in recent years that it is time to make developmental education "Job One." The nation needs for community colleges to step up to the challenge because there is no other viable option.

My approach has always been to engage the entire institution in the discussion about what is at stake in developmental education. The pipeline to Shakespeare begins in developmental writing or reading. The key to increasing state funding is found in the retention numbers. People can relate to the issues when they hear about the lives of the people literally being saved.

We must also be realistic and acknowledge that many legislators do not like to fund these efforts. Many talk about repeat funding for what should have been handled in K-12. It is, therefore, important to have these discussions both inside and outside the institution. I have always published an annual report in which progress could be shared; I am unable to recall a single year when we did not have progress to report.

That was true in 1968 when I was first involved in creating a cohesive program in developmental studies, and it was true five institutions later when I retired for the second time at the end of 2003. This last retirement has allowed me to focus more broadly on the issues through work with Achieving the Dream, an initiative involving 83 institutions in 15 states. All of these institutions are dealing directly with developmental education.

H.B.: You and I have both argued in speeches and publications that good institutional policies help make good developmental education. We have both generated data indicating that institutional policies based on research, data, and best practices increase the likelihood of students' retention and academic success. What are some of the policies you think colleges should adopt to support developmental education?

B.M.: Compelling each entering student (including part time) to go through assessment

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is a good starting point. Mandatory placement comes right after that in importance. Failing at that, strong advice and signed waivers should be in place. Why should a part-time student with reading difficulties be allowed to register for a class in which the text is written well beyond the ability of the student? Stopping the practice of late registration can work wonders for the students who need remediation. Students who are least likely to succeed do not need to start well behind everyone else in classes. Late start classes can be a good alternative for these students.

Reading should be the first requirement for students who test into developmental reading, writing, and mathematics. Requiring a student success course for these students has shown encouraging results in several Achieving the Dream colleges. Requiring lab time as a part of course requirements (with or without an extra-credit hour) has also produced positive results.

H.B.: In your research and experience, what are some of the most important "best practices" in developmental education?

B.M.: The development of a comprehensive academic support center is probably the best

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practice I have supported along the way. I tend to talk these days about encouraging or promising practices instead of best practice as I work with Achieving the Dream. We hope to demonstrate best practice in the multiyear effort, but that takes time.

My idea of the support center includes support labs for reading, writing, mathematics, study skills, GED/ABE, ESL, and special learn-

ing support (diagnosis). It includes appropriate technology along with tutors (peer and professional) and mentors. I once asked for an inventory at CCD and found 180 computers and 180 tutors at a point in time (high tech/high touch).

Case management (advocate/coach) for the most underprepared students, Supplemental Instruction in developmental mathematics, learning communities (particularly a developmental course with a student success course), required student success courses, required extra lab time, fast-track developmental mathematics courses, and professional development are among the practices demonstrating encouraging results in Achieving the Dream colleges. Developmental mathematics is being dealt with so often because a lack of student success in that area has been identified as a major challenge. Cohort tracking of all entering students is critical for all institutions as they attempt to understand their problems.

H.B.: Many states, particularly Florida and California, have experienced severe financial cutbacks in community college funding. Given this, how would you recommend that college administrators use the limited amount of funding available to invest in improving developmental education? What are the most important investments?

B.M.: I have a fairly simple answer to this one. If an institution understands where it is failing and is committed to funding what is most important, then it will identify developmental education as one of its priorities. Also, it does not require a lot of money to carefully coordinate the entire developmental education effort once the institution determines it is important. Coordination is critical when an institution does not have a centralized department or division. Professional development for all involved does not need to be a costly endeavor. Wise use of release time can be effective here.

H.B.: What are some of the institutions that you think are doing the best job of developmental education? Why?

B.M.: I am proud of the work being done in the 83 institutions of Achieving the Dream. They agreed to do cohort tracking (disaggregated data) as the basis for understanding the flow of students through (or out of) the institution. When you do that, developmental education emerges as an area needing attention. These institutions are trying interventions such as the ones previously mentioned followed by a formative evaluation. Encouraging interventions are scaled-up and others are dropped. Results are shared broadly with all concerned about the issues. We are beginning to see similar interventions in multiple institutions across multiple semesters. It will be out of that experience that we will name promising practices and ultimately best practices.

Results from learning community work that I launched at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn have recently been published by MDRC. I believe it was the first random assignment effort with control and treatment groups to be evaluated in a community college. The results are encouraging and the college now has 60% of its entering students involved in the effort.

H.B.: As you are well aware, the role of community colleges in the U.S. is changing. Their role in college transfer is declining, their role in career preparation is increasing, and the amount of developmental education they provide is also increasing. What do you envision as the major challenges that community college developmen-

> *It is time to transform the way we do business (fix colleges rather than students).*

tal education is likely to face in the foreseeable future?

B.M.: The most serious challenge may be that not enough colleges have identified developmental education success as vital to their longterm need to produce more graduates and transfers. Governors, legislators, and business leaders are running out of patience at this point. Colleges too often react defensively when asked about the lack of student progress through developmental education. If a majority of entering students need remediation, and if less than half of them ever complete the sequence and move to college-level courses, then institutions must face the need and elevate the importance of the work. That may not be popular, but it is required of the sector if our country is to be competitive in the future.

H.B.: Many argue that today's community college students are dramatically different than those of only a decade ago. Community colleges are serving greater numbers of students who are not only more underprepared but also more diverse. Do you agree with this argument? If so, how do you think the students are different today?

B.M.: They are different, but that is the wrong question. The colleges that I see making progress are the ones where they decide to get to know who their students really are as they enter. Devising ways to involve students in focus groups as early as orientation (which should be required) is a great place to start. Using surveys (like CCSSE and SENSE) can provide the student "voice" as colleges try to structure their approaches. Creation of engaging activities in classes during the first weeks of the first semester or quarter can help faculty get to know students, and it will also allow students to get to know each other. Connections make a difference, and early connections make the most difference. It is time to get beyond the old student deficit model and the discussions about the right to fail. It is time to transform the way we do business (fix colleges rather than students) so that more students can be successful. The stakes are too high to do anything else.

Appendix
Achieving the Dream Institutions

2007 Institutions

National Park Community College, AR
Ouachita Technical College, AR
Phillips Community College, AR
Pulaski Technical College, AR
The University of Hawaii Community Colleges, HI
Bunker Hill Community College, MA
Northern Essex Community College, MA
Roxbury Community College, MA
Springfield Technical Community College, MA
Bay de Noc Community College, MI
Henry Ford Community College, MI
Jackson Community College, MI
Lake Michigan College, MI
North Central Michigan College, MI
Wayne County Community College District, MI
Oklahoma City Community College, OK
Rose State College, OK
Tulsa Community College, OK
Aiken Technical College, SC
Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College, SC
Technical College of the Lowcountry, SC
Trident Technical College, SC
Paris Junior College, TX
The Victoria College, TX
University of Houston, TX
Northern Virginia Community College, VA

A full list of participating institutions and further information is available at
http://www.achievingthedream.org/aboutatd/collegeprofiles/default.tp ⟳