Enhancing Student Access and Retention

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The goals of developmental education include promoting educational opportunity through efforts that enhance both access and retention. Although the measures taken and the issues related to access and retention may overlap, they are not synonymous and must be addressed separately. Defining access is more complicated than it might appear. Traditionally, access has been viewed as opening the door to postsecondary education. With the proliferation of public community colleges and technical institutions in many states, some educators and legislators alike have assumed that the problem of access has been addressed because relatively low-cost programs are available to anyone with a high school diploma or its equivalent. However, numerous other issues related to access are overlooked.

Factors related to access to postsecondary education include proximity, financial considerations, the availability of child care, and testing and placement policies. A prospective student may meet admissions criteria and may have the academic ability to be successful, but may not be able to pursue postsecondary education due to distance to the closest institution, lack of transportation, inability to pay, loss of potential income, family commitments, or other obstacles. Barriers such as these may be exacerbated by testing and placement policies that require students to complete what are considered pre-college, noncredit courses in order to eventually pursue a degree. When faced with the possibility of spending up to a year attending and paying for courses that are considered "remedial," it is understandable that some prospective students consider their access denied.

Another critical question in any discussion of access is "access to what?" There is growing concern that socio-economically disadvantaged students, for example, may have access to local two-year institutions, but that there may not be equal access to four-year colleges and universities. In several states developmental education programs in public institutions are now restricted to two-year institutions; in these states developmental education has been eliminated from research universities, thus further limiting access to those institutions. Legislators have decided that underprepared students have no place in four-year institutions. One of the problems with this position is that a student who is gifted in one discipline may require academic assistance in another. Is it appropriate to deny the admission of a talented musician, for example, to the institution with the strongest music program because the student is considered underprepared in another area, such as English composition? Of perhaps greatest concern may be whether policies such as these result in the under-representation of protected groups, such as students of color, in public four-year colleges and universities, especially when the cause of these students' inadequate preparation may be institutionalized racism, even if unintended.

Partnerships between elementary, middle, and secondary schools and postsecondary institutions can enhance both access and retention (American Association for Higher Education, 1999; Tompkins, 1999; Wiseman, 1999). Projects that promote seamless educational programs for students are rare. Further communication is needed between officials at all levels of public education. Postsecondary educators cannot approach partnerships with the attitude that their role is to "fix" problems in the K-12 system. Educators can also become more involved in other opportunities for partnerships, including workplace literacy projects (e.g., Longman, Atkinson, Miholic, & Simpson, 1999) and educational programs provided by the military (e.g., Griffith, 1999).

Retention

Just as the term access requires a more thorough definition, retention may be measured in so many different ways that an accurate definition is elusive. There are numerous issues that surround perceptions of academic success, which is often equated with retention. Graduation rates are perhaps the most commonly accepted measure of retention, but they generally fail to take into ac-

count other factors such as: (a) students who transfer to other institutions, including students who ultimately earn degrees elsewhere; (b) students who "stop out" and re-enter later; (c) students who leave due to factors over which the institution has no control (e.g., personal reasons such as illness, financial problems); (d) students for whom traditional higher education is not the most productive form of learning; and (e) students who achieve alternative forms of success without graduating. Is a student who drops out to perform an award-winning role in theater or film, for example, unsuccessful? Graduation rates of collegiate athletes are commonly criticized without considering those student athletes who choose to pursue professional careers. What is needed is an inclusive definition of retention that fosters cooperation among institutions, at least within public systems of higher education, to account for transfers. Furthermore, measures of retention must be longitudinal, allowing for stopping out and reentering. Some policies developed to encourage retention, such as placement and exit testing and sophomore or junior year proficiency testing (e.g., in reading and writing) can have the opposite effect.

Inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of retention may be responsible for why retention statistics often appear so low. However, another problem is that retention programs are often aimed only at the students at the two ends of the continuum, high-risk students and honors students. Interventions such as Supplemental Instruction that target high-risk courses rather than students can be effective in enhancing retention among all students. In his talent development model, Alexander Astin (1985) encourages an approach that promotes the academic growth of each student, regardless of where he or she starts. What is important is what each individual student achieves. When viewed from this perspective, graduation is not the ultimate measure of success.

Good instruction promotes retention, as do programs that provide a supportive learning environment, such as learning communities. Educational climate, both within and outside the classroom, can have a significant impact on student satisfaction and retention. Developmental education can play a critical role in student retention, but developmental educators must be in agreement regarding the scope and mission of our profession. The National Association for Developmental Education's (NADE) definition refers to providing academic assistance and learning support for all postsecondary learners. However, many developmental education practitioners and programs have not embraced this definition and

continue to focus their efforts only on students considered at risk. One of the current problems of developmental education as a profession is a bifurcated identity. Although the topic of this session was access and retention, definition issues brought the discussion back to not only the definition of developmental education, but also the terminology. Can the profession flourish when its name is embedded in "at risk" rhetoric?

Recommendations

1. Develop definitions of access and retention that will meet with the approval of legislators, administrators, and developmental educators and at the same time take into account the needs of individual students.

2. Determine the role of developmental education in enhancing access and retention. To accomplish this goal may first require a redefinition and perhaps a renaming of developmental education.

3. Explore other lenses for viewing access and retention, including critical pedagogy.

4. Conduct and reward research related to access and retention. Create new approaches that are theoretically sound and reflect research findings regarding best practices.

5. Provide professional development opportunities to explore strengthening the profession of developmental education and responding to the revolving door of developmental education faculty. How can the profession hope to achieve its goals when turnover occurs so frequently? Retention of developmental education faculty and staff is a separate issue that must be addressed.

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