

Reflections on “Enhancing Rigor in Developmental Education”

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“Rigor” is a slippery concept, since there are so many different definitions of academic rigor. One, for example, might be termed “coverage,” with a larger amount of material covered in a shorter amount of time; another stresses achieving higher levels of complexity in the material. In contrast, the authors of “[Enhancing Rigor in Developmental Education](#)” embrace a notion of rigor as greater effectiveness in preparing students for college-level coursework. Community colleges interested in improving their developmental programs might therefore discuss what rigor means before deciding what strategies to adopt.

Since, in addition to requiring deeper comprehension, college courses emphasize reasoning, problem solving, transfer of knowledge, and other capacities sometimes referred to as “higher order thinking skills” or “twenty-first century skills,” rigor in the sense of preparation for college courses requires different pedagogies, rather than more or different content. Shifting to more conceptual and student-centered teaching is difficult work, since drill-and-practice methods are so deeply embedded in conventional teaching, textbooks, and instructional conceptions. The authors of “Enhancing Rigor” are right to explore three strategies for doing so.

The problem is that there are instructors in virtually every college who have shifted to these classroom techniques, but they are usually isolated and reach relatively few students. The real challenge, therefore, is to change approaches to instruction among most faculty in order to reach most students. This requires reform strategies that go beyond individual classroom methods, and that are more collective or institutional. The following are three such strategies:

1. **Focusing reform at the department level.** Reforms may be most effectively implemented when departments define their own goals, conceptions of rigor and

effectiveness, and approaches to instruction, and when they develop methods of recruitment and professional development to help sustain reforms over time. The alignment of developmental courses with college-level courses also needs to take place at the departmental level, with departments working together.

2. **Borrowing well-developed instructional approaches from elsewhere.**

Examples include the Reading Apprenticeship framework for instruction used in secondary education, the writing process championed by the National Writing Project, the Quantway and Statway programs created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the math materials promoted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Borrowing such approaches can facilitate reforms by larger numbers of instructors and prevent departments from having to develop their own approaches and curriculum materials.

3. **Establishing centers for teaching and learning aimed at faculty.** Centers for teaching and learning can be an important resource for faculty teaching reformed developmental courses, providing a variety of workshops, materials, and classroom observations to help faculty improve their instruction. Again, such centers have the potential to reach large numbers of instructors, so that reform is not merely an effort by isolated individuals. They can also include the part-time instructors who teach such a large portion of developmental education courses.

Of course, both changes in classroom practices and changes in institutional approaches are necessary to reform developmental education. But the first step toward reform is to recognize that enhancing rigor and effectiveness will require developmental education to look very different from how it looks today.