

BRINGING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION TO SCALE

Executive Summary

LESSONS FROM THE
DEVELOPMENTAL
EDUCATION INITIATIVE

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Overview

While over half of all community college students are judged to need developmental (or remedial) reading, composition, and/or mathematics classes, these courses — which students are often required to complete before they can enroll in courses that confer credit toward a degree — typically present major roadblocks to student progress. To address this issue, the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) was created in 2009. Fifteen highly diverse community colleges that had been early participants in Achieving the Dream, a national community college reform network, each received a three-year grant of \$743,000 to scale up existing interventions or establish new ones that would help students progress through developmental courses more quickly and successfully. The colleges typically identified two or three “focal strategies” — most often, student support services and new instructional strategies — for achieving these goals. This second and final report from the evaluation relies on both qualitative and quantitative data to examine the implementation of these focal strategies.

The report finds that, across the colleges, the percentage of incoming developmental students participating in at least one focal strategy more than doubled, rising from 18 percent in fall 2009 to 41 percent in fall 2011. Resource adequacy, communication, engagement, and a departmentwide or institutionwide commitment to a particular instructional practice all facilitated scale-up. At the same time, colleges generally expected to reach many more students with their reforms than they actually did. Factors that worked against greater scale-up sometimes reflected competing values and goals: institutional reluctance to impose mandates about how students should learn and instructors teach, students’ own wishes and priorities, a perceived need to scale *back* when strategies appeared to be ineffective, and a desire to evaluate the strategies’ apparent effectiveness before moving forward.

A rigorous impact study was not part of the evaluation. Instead, outcomes for focal strategy participants were compared with outcomes for nonparticipants, and outcomes for pre-DEI cohorts of students were compared with outcomes for students who enrolled after the DEI began. While the results cannot be regarded as conclusive, the two different analytic approaches yield similar findings: Most often, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups being compared. When there was such a difference, students were much more likely to benefit from the DEI strategies than to be harmed by them.

The DEI’s influence on participating colleges extends beyond the focal strategies. The colleges used DEI monies to support policy changes and other programmatic reforms as well as to fund both off-site conference attendance and on-campus professional development on a broad range of topics related to developmental education. The DEI stimulated wider discussions about student success and campus priorities, and some DEI innovations will carry over into future initiatives.

Preface

As America climbs out of the Great Recession, the workers most likely to be left behind are those without postsecondary credentials. Community colleges play an important role in supplying students with the education and training that they need to succeed in the labor market. But many students enrolling in community college lack the academic skills deemed necessary to do college-level work. They are required, instead, to take developmental (remedial) classes before embarking on coursework that confers credits and leads to a degree. Unfortunately, such students all too often do not complete their prescribed developmental coursework, and they “stop out” or drop out of college altogether.

The Developmental Education Initiative (DEI), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and by Lumina Foundation, was an effort to remedy this situation. Fifteen community colleges were selected to expand preexisting interventions or put in place new ones directed toward helping students move through developmental coursework more quickly and more successfully. MDRC was asked to assess the degree of scale-up that took place, to examine the outcomes associated with the interventions, and to identify the conditions that facilitated or constrained scale-up efforts.

This study shows that colleges were, indeed, able to expand the reach of their interventions — although, in most cases, not to the extent that they had hoped. While the evaluation design was not rigorous enough to provide conclusive evidence, there is reason to think that some of the interventions improved student outcomes. Finally, the report singles out a number of factors that led to successful scale-up. It is hoped that its lessons will assist other colleges as they seek to help more underprepared students to attain the skills and credentials that have increasingly become key to workplace success.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the contributions of many people. But above all, we are indebted to the presidents, other key administrators, faculty, staff, and students at the colleges that participated in the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI). Too numerous to name personally, they spent time with us over the past three years, responded to our phone calls and e-mails and other requests for information, and offered us not only their knowledge and insights but also their hospitality and their kindness. Getting to know them has been the most satisfying part of this entire endeavor.

We also want to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance we have received from Mary Williams and Courtney Brown at Lumina Foundation for Education and from Kendall Guthrie and Suzanne Walsh at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This report was improved by careful readings by Carol Lincoln, Katie Loovis, and Rachel Singer of Achieving the Dream, Inc., and by David Dodson, Abby Parcell, and Maggie Shelton at MDC, Inc. In particular, they helped us understand the context in which the DEI unfolded. We especially appreciate Abby's good humor and quickness to respond to our sometimes redundant requests.

Sung-Woo Cho at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, contributed in key ways to the analysis of the quantitative data. At MDRC, Herbert Collado, Kelley Fong, Alissa Gardenhire, and Rashida Welbeck conducted periodic interviews with project directors at the various sites. Mario Flecha cheerfully arranged both meetings and travels.

Also at MDRC, Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow provided a searching critique of an earlier draft that greatly strengthened the final version. Fred Doolittle and Thomas Brock offered both wise guidance and unfailing support. Alyssa Ratledge took on the editing of the report's exhibits as well as fact-checking with skill and tact. Robert Weber edited the report, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

There is wide agreement that the well-paying jobs of the future will require postsecondary credentials. But for many students attending community college, developmental (or remedial) classes in reading, composition, and/or mathematics — the courses that students often must complete before they can enroll in courses that confer credit toward a degree — pose an often-insuperable barrier to progress. While over half of all community college students are judged to need at least one developmental class, the majority of students who are referred to developmental education do not complete their prescribed sequence of remedial courses, much less persist and obtain a diploma or certificate.

To address this issue, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation created the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) in 2009; Lumina Foundation for Education funded the evaluation. Fifteen colleges that had been early participants in Achieving the Dream (AtD): Community Colleges Count, a national community college reform network dedicated to evidence-based decision-making, were selected to receive grants of \$743,000 each over a three-year period. The institutions are highly diverse in size, location, and the characteristics of the students they serve. The purpose of the DEI grants was to enable the colleges to scale up existing interventions, or establish new ones, that would help students to progress through developmental courses more rapidly and more successfully or to bypass these courses altogether. DEI funding also financed state policy teams that sought to influence state higher education legislation and policies. MDC, a North Carolina-based nonprofit organization, was selected as managing partner of the demonstration and in this role monitored and assisted the colleges, organized communications, and convened regular meetings of demonstration participants.

Six other organizations made up the partnership that provided leadership and support for the colleges. Among these, MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research organization, was asked to evaluate the demonstration, with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, serving as evaluation partner. The directive to the evaluators was to examine the implementation of the DEI at the participating colleges. This report — the second and final report from the evaluation¹ — relies on a combination of qualitative data (primarily interviews with key personnel conducted during the course of site visits to all 15 institutions and through periodic telephone calls with project directors) and

¹For the previous report, see Janet Quint, D. Crystal Byndloss, Herbert Collado, Alissa Gardenhire, Asya Magazinnik, Genevieve Orr, Rashida Welbeck, and Shanna S. Jaggars, *Scaling Up Is Hard to Do: Progress and Challenges During the First Year of the Achieving the Dream Developmental Education Initiative* (New York: MDRC, 2011).

quantitative data (information on participation and on student outcomes that the colleges regularly collected). It addresses three main questions:

- To what extent did the colleges scale up their chosen developmental education reforms to serve more students?
- What factors affected the colleges' ability to expand their programs and practices?
- To what extent were the colleges' strategies associated with improvements in student outcomes?

The report also considers ways that participation in the DEI influenced the colleges more broadly. For these reasons, it may be of interest to other colleges looking to scale up reforms (especially reforms that are related to instruction and the provision of student supports), as well as to funders concerned about how best to support community colleges in bringing promising ideas to scale.

The Initiative's Premises and On-the-Ground Realities

The funders' original goal was for the colleges to expand strategies that the colleges had developed as Achieving the Dream sites and that, according to the colleges' internal evaluations, had demonstrated success. Early on, however, the funders agreed that colleges should be allowed to develop new initiatives as well as to scale up existing interventions. Soon after the demonstration was launched, colleges were advised to identify up to three "focal strategies" that could be expected to serve increasing numbers of students over time and on which the evaluation would center. As it turned out, the focal strategies that the colleges proposed were almost evenly divided between ones that were new and ones that were scaled up from existing interventions.

Previous efforts to scale up interventions at community colleges had largely gone unexamined, and learning what it takes to expand promising interventions was a key demonstration goal. An initial assumption was that funding constraints were a fundamental impediment to scaling and that, with these eliminated through generous grants to the DEI institutions, college administrators — given modest technical assistance — would have the capacity to lead major scale-up efforts. Within the first year, however, it became apparent that a variety of other barriers stood in the way of scaling, and MDC was called on to provide more coaching and additional information-exchange meetings. MDC also prepared a planning guide detailing in user-friendly language the steps to be taken and the tasks to be accomplished in scaling up.

The report finds that the DEI colleges made demonstrable progress in implementing and scaling up developmental education reforms but that they also faced three major challenges.

First, the operational definition of “scaling up” was not fully specified, and it changed over time. The Request for Proposals called for the colleges to mount strategies that would reach “a significant number of students,” and, at the outset, colleges were asked to establish their own targets for the number of students to be served by the focal strategies each year. About two-thirds of the way through the demonstration, DEI partners and funders introduced a new conceptual framework and vocabulary for planning scale-up. They urged the colleges to consider how they could move from serving *some* students in pilot projects to serving *more* students (as they were doing in the DEI) and, finally, to reaching *most* if not all students eligible for a particular intervention. What “most” meant was not defined for individual institutions; it was made clear, however, that colleges were not expected to serve most students within the demonstration period.

Second, at the time that the initiative was funded, the limited evidence base then available meant that little was known with certainty about how to improve developmental education outcomes for community college students. As a result, most of the focal strategies that the colleges proposed to expand and implement represented “best practices” rather than policies and programs whose beneficial effects had been proven through rigorous research.

Finally, the DEI unfolded at a time when community colleges nationwide were experiencing substantial increases in enrollment. All the DEI institutions registered increased student populations, and, at half of them, the number of students rose by 20 percent or more. While the proportion of students requiring developmental education rose by just 1 percent across all the colleges, this statistic masks considerable variation, with some colleges experiencing double-digit growth in the proportion of students needing remediation. Thus, at the same time that the colleges were implementing the new DEI strategies and policies, they were facing significant challenges in making instructional and support services available to much larger numbers of students.

The Focal Strategies

Collectively, the 15 DEI colleges implemented 46 focal strategies. For analytic purposes, these strategies were classified as fitting one of four *types* and as having one of four *objectives*. The great majority (87 percent) of focal strategies were of two types: instructional strategies (changes in the content of developmental classes or in the means by which they were taught) and support strategies (efforts to address students’ academic and personal issues). Nine of the colleges adopted at least one of each of these two kinds of strategies. The two remaining types of strategies — policy changes and strategies directed toward high school students — were less frequently cited. Moreover, the objectives of these last two kinds of strategies could not readily be classified, sometimes because they had multiple objectives.

Of the 40 strategies whose objective was identifiable, 19 were classified as aimed at providing supports to bolster students' skills or to help them resolve other problems; examples of strategies with this objective include study skills courses, tutoring, and advising. Fourteen strategies — including ones involving modularized and computerized courses and paired college-level and developmental courses — were aimed at accelerating students' progress through the developmental sequence. Four strategies sought to help students avoid unnecessary developmental coursework through placement test preparation, and three entailed implementing new approaches to make instruction more relevant and engaging.

Key Findings About Scaling Up the Focal Strategies

- **Participation in the focal strategies more than doubled over time, but most of the strategies did not meet established participation goals.**

Across the colleges, the proportion of incoming developmental students served by at least one focal strategy rose from 18 percent in fall 2009 (the initiative's first semester) to 41 percent in fall 2011 (the last semester for which data were available). Had participation data from spring 2012 been available, the measured increase would have been even larger. Nonetheless, for reasons discussed below, colleges generally did not meet the ambitious participation goals that they had set for serving students with their individual focal strategies. Both participation data and information about the colleges' target numbers were available for 33 strategies. For four of these strategies, participation equaled or exceeded (sometimes greatly) the targets that colleges had established. The majority of strategies fell far short, however, reaching less than half the students to whom they were targeted. As noted above, colleges were not expected to go from serving "more" to serving "most" students within the time frame of the DEI demonstration. Still, by fall 2011, 10 of the 15 colleges were unable to reach as many as half their incoming developmental students with a focal strategy and, thus, had a considerable way to go in meeting the longer-term goal of serving most students. Interestingly, there was no difference in the extent of scale-up between new strategies and preexisting ones.

- **Resource adequacy, communication, and engagement were three important factors promoting large-scale implementation of the focal strategies.**

Resources needed for scaling up the strategies included adequate staff, space, and, for many interventions, technology. Strong and positive communications helped ensure scale-up, with the vocal support of the president proving especially critical. Professional development for staff members and staff involvement in planning and oversight committees increased support for the strategies. Colleges also learned the importance of marketing the focal strategies to students, and they used a variety of media to do so, from brochures to videos to social networks.

- **A fourth key factor was a departmentwide or institutionwide commitment to uniform instructional practice; several instructional strategies that reflected this commitment were notable because they were begun with the intention of serving all students from the outset.**

Three new focal strategies — ones involving computerized instruction and the infusion of content from sociology and history into developmental reading and English courses — entailed decisions that all faculty members who were teaching sections of a course would teach them a certain way. This is a particularly efficient mode of scale-up because all necessary faculty resources are already in place and because all students who need developmental classes must follow the prescribed approach. In two of the three cases, administrators prescribed the new instructional practices in a process referred to here as “gentle fiat”: While instructors may help select and may receive professional development on the new approach (this is what makes the fiat “gentle”), they are not free to deviate from it. In the third instance, faculty members themselves decided to adopt the new approach, and, in general, the experience of the DEI institutions indicates that faculty input into the chosen strategy helps to curb resistance to it and to make for smoother implementation.

- **In contrast, factors that worked against full scale-up included — along with resource limitations — institutional reluctance to impose mandates about how students should learn and instructors teach, students’ own wishes and priorities, a perceived need to scale *back* when strategies appeared to be ineffective, and a desire to evaluate the strategies’ apparent effectiveness before moving forward.**

Limited scale-up sometimes reflected colleges’ competing priorities and values. While colleges wanted to scale up their focal strategies, some colleges also wanted to give students a choice of learning modalities rather than to impose a uniform approach. Some colleges wanted to step back and reevaluate rather than to move forward when an approach did not seem to be working. And even when approaches did seem to be working, some colleges wanted some evidence of effectiveness before expanding them further.

Key Findings About Student Outcomes

The analysis examines five key outcomes: total credits earned in the first term, grade point average in the first term, persistence into the second term, passing the “gatekeeper” (first college-level English course required for completion of a degree) by the end of the second term, and passing the gatekeeper math course by the end of the second term.

A rigorous impact study using random assignment or a strong alternative research design was not part of the charge to the evaluators. The methods used in this study can show that the DEI was *associated* with the outcomes that were observed but not that the DEI *caused* these outcomes. The findings below should therefore be regarded as suggestive but in no way conclusive.

- **When outcomes for participants in the focal strategies were compared with outcomes for nonparticipants, the majority of outcome differences (61 percent) were not statistically significant. About a third of the strategies were associated with positive gains for students, and a handful were associated with negative outcomes. Finally, participation was more likely to be associated with positive results for some outcomes than for other outcomes.**

One approach to the analysis was to compare outcomes for participants in the strategies during their first term with outcomes for students who were eligible but did not participate, controlling as much as possible for students' demographic and achievement-related characteristics. (Unmeasured differences could not be controlled for, however.) For all but a small number of outcomes, participation in the strategies was associated either with better outcomes for participants or with no statistically significant differences between outcomes for participants and nonparticipants. Participation in the DEI strategies was especially likely to be associated with positive results on two of the five outcomes examined: credits earned during the first term and passing the gatekeeper English course by the end of the second term.

- **Strategies that involved contextualized instruction and collaborative learning were more likely than other kinds of strategies to be associated with positive outcome differences.**

Because there are only three examples of such strategies, making generalizations is risky; this finding is, however, consistent with the results of other research. Thus, more rigorous outside studies confirm that contextualized instruction in vocational programs and learning communities has helped students to earn more course credits and progress from developmental into college-level coursework. There is also strong evidence supporting the use of structured collaborative learning as a pedagogical technique.

- **When outcomes for cohorts of students who enrolled in the colleges before the inception of the DEI were compared with outcomes for students who enrolled after the DEI was put in place (whether or not these students participated in any of the focal strategies), the later enrollees were found to have achieved outcomes that were either better than or similar to the outcomes of students who had entered earlier.**

This approach to examining outcome differences yields findings similar to the approach that compares participants with nonparticipants. After the DEI's implementation, students generally did as well as or better than they had previously. Again, factors other than the DEI may explain these differences.

- **In general, strategies that reached more than 50 percent of the students whom they aimed to serve were more likely to be associated with positive outcomes than strategies that reached smaller numbers of students.**

It is not clear whether and to what extent these strategies had to do with the positive outcomes. It may be that colleges that were effective in engaging students in their focal strategies were also likely to be effective more generally.

From a quantitative point of view, the DEI represents a modest improvement for the participating colleges. While the number of participants in the focal strategies doubled over the period measured, most strategies fell short both of the numerical targets that colleges had set for themselves and of reaching the majority of students in their target populations. And while many more strategies were associated with positive outcomes for participants than with negative outcomes, the majority of strategies did not make a difference one way or the other.

Other Outcomes: The DEI in Broader Perspective

It would be inappropriate to judge the DEI on the basis of the numbers alone, however. To help students accelerate through and otherwise succeed in their developmental courses, the colleges used DEI funding to support policy changes and programmatic reforms beyond those included in their focal strategies. The colleges also used their DEI grants to support on-campus professional development on a broad range of topics related to developmental education, including the use of new instructional modalities, the characteristics and needs of low-income students, and how instructors could help students better meet those needs. College personnel learned from one another and from their counterparts at non-DEI colleges at conferences and meetings whose attendance was made possible by DEI monies. And, at some colleges, the DEI stimulated wider discussions about student success and campus priorities.

It also appears that the DEI will leave a lasting legacy at participating colleges. At some institutions, leaders were committed from the start to continuing to support the focal strategies with regular college funding after the DEI grants expired; at other institutions, leaders did not make such advance commitments but have opted to move forward with the strategies that they deemed successful. Some DEI innovations will carry over into future initiatives — notably, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's new community college reform

effort known as Completion by Design. And the intervention has brought forward a new group of able and thoughtful administrators.

At the outset of the DEI, little was known about what is required for scaling up initiatives in community colleges. This study suggests that additional resources may be necessary but are not sufficient. Also critical are communication, engagement, and a commitment to uniform practice throughout a department or institution. Time is also critical, not just for putting new interventions in place but also for securing the buy-in and support needed for smooth implementation. Yet another lesson concerns the importance of having expectations that are well specified and shared by all parties. Finally, the experiences of the DEI colleges serve as reminders that scale-up is just one of many objectives that community colleges strive to meet, that the complexities of students' lives can interfere with scale-up efforts, and that both high ambitions and realistic expectations for expanding promising initiatives are in order.

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

