The Need for Developmental Education at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2
Abstract 3
  Background 4
  Depth and Breadth of Developmental Education Programs 5
  The Fundamental Need for Developmental Education 7
  Assessing Success 9
Conclusion 11
References 12
Appendix 1: Links to Example Developmental Education Programs Worldwide: 14

Abstract

The future of the Center for Academic Development (CAD) at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI) is in question. Much of the debate concerns a proposed review and revision of the university core curriculum, the role of developmental education and the need for developmental education in the Moroccan context. Proposals have been made to reduce the depth and breadth of CAD courses and in some instances to replace them with 'content' courses. Much of this discussion has been behind closed doors without input from concerned faculty. This paper attempts to put the discussion in a historical context and review the fundamental arguments for developmental education courses at AUI.

Background

In an age of globalized, internationalized education, the need for a homogenizing mechanism for incoming students is increasingly evident. In the United States, this is in part due to the decline of the public school system because of budget cuts; but also to factors such as immigration, an influx of foreign students, the popularity of home schooling, and a widening disparity between public and private education. First year students arrive at universities speaking many languages, from many cultures and socialization processes; they may have attended a public institution adhering to a canonical college preparatory process, or been taught at a charter school with an emphasis on arts, science, or an alternative method of education. Universities find themselves in the position of educating students who have received incredibly divergent, even contradictory, information about the expectations that universities have for them.

At international universities as well as in the U.S., and in particular at AUI, the need for a program to address the differing educational preparation of students is acute. In Morocco, students may have attended French, American, or Moroccan schools, public or private schools, or studied abroad. Their entire education prior to arriving at AUI might have been not just in another language but in another educational philosophy and style entirely. Taught to copy, they will arrive here and be asked to produce original work (copying, they learn, may even be punished as plagiarism). Trained to follow their teachers in everything from opinion to work method, they will now be asked to adopt an independent learning style that matches their own needs. For many students, everything from the use of academic sources to the structure of an essay to the application of critical thinking is new.

Enter the Center for Academic Development (CAD), and myriad programs like it. The names of such centers – which might be incorporated into the university as separate departments, sub-departments, or elements of core curricula – range; they are called Writing Centers, First Year Programs, Freshman Studies, Foundation Classes. All serve the same purpose: to ensure that a diverse incoming population learns immediately, in practical and directed terms, what their chosen university expects from them regarding study skills, writing, and research. Students enter at a variety of levels and leave with a standardized set of abilities, prepared for every resulting level of discourse and production. As Casazza (1999) states, without such programs universities offer nothing more than a “false opportunity;” the implication being that if we do not provide adequate support for students to succeed, we are engaged in nothing more than selling diplomas.

Depth and Breadth of Developmental Education Programs

The work undertaken by 'Centers for Academic Development' has a long and proud, though sometimes troubled, history. According to Casazza, (1999) the roots of developmental education in the American educational system can be traced to the 1800's and has since been intertwined with concepts such as 'remedial, and 'underprepared'. As she points out these labels have come to have strong negative connotations. The term remedial education connotes a sense of failure – failure of the educational system, failure of the student, failure of the teacher and the subsequent need to repair this failure. Similarly, underprepared clearly suggests that the student is not ready for tertiary level education.

Yet it is important to note that current developmental education programs – as manifested in various forms of learning support – exist not just in community colleges, vocational schools, or at lesser state university branches. At the highest levels, universities now include first year programs that seek to regulate student skills and prepare them for academic success in their own terms. In part, this is a response to the contentious debates over the Western canon in the 1980's and 1990's. One consequence of these debates was a reexamination of the overall purpose of higher education; is it in fact to pass on a predetermined set of knowledge, or is it to equip students to be creators of and participants in knowledge? Many universities settled on the latter. Thus, programs such as the first-year studies at elite colleges like Sarah Lawrence and Bryn Mawr were developed. Though these courses ostensibly address a "subject," in fact, their purpose is not to pass on base knowledge in the manner of a traditional Introduction to Engineering or Philosophy class. Instead, their goal is to integrate the incoming students into the particular culture of that university and to train them in the base academic skills which they will be expected to perform throughout the rest of their academic career.

These skills are not as a matter of course taught elsewhere in the university. Most professors, particularly at research-oriented universities, lack both the training and the interest to educate their students in basic research, writing, and study processes, even when they are aware that those processes vary between disciplines. Thus, a Center for Academic Development works not just as a benefit for the students, but as an aid to other faculty. As Casazza (1999) says, "… a very distinctive feature of developmental education … is the assumption that all learners have talents; it is up to us as educators to identify them and use [those talents] to support other areas."

According to Boylan (as cited in Neuburger, 1999) developmental courses are found in about 75% of universities in the U. S. and in over 90% of the nation's total postsecondary institutions. When tutorial and learning assistance programs are added to this equation, then almost all U.S. colleges and universities offer some formal program to the students they accept.

This expansion of learning support involves a shift within and across other departments, as Centers for Academic Development, Writing Centers, and other such programs take over the role previously undertaken by courses such as Composition. In fact, a close look at any major university shows that traditional composition has altered from the proverbial English 101 – a course focused on writing about English literature – into the now nearly ubiquitous College Writing-style course. Implicit in this shift is the current understanding that critical thinking and writing are integrally, necessarily related, and that good writing is essential across the curriculum (in fact the term "writing across the curriculum" has evolved into a major philosophical element of university curricula worldwide). In combination with the teaching of essay composition, College Writing and other First Year Studies courses also teach study and research skills. While at some universities such programs might last a single year, at many institutions, such as at AUI, these programs are implemented across several years, acting to complement and reinforce a student's continued progression towards graduation.

Of course, many students at all levels enter postsecondary education simply under-prepared for college-level work. Accordingly, in Fall 2000, some 76 percent of postsecondary institutions in the U.S. offered at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course (Parsad and Lewis, 2003).[1] Postsecondary transcripts of 12th-graders in 1992 who enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 show that 61 percent of students who first attended a public 2-year and 25 percent who first attended a 4-year institution completed at least one remedial course at the postsecondary level

Table 1: Developmental Education Programs

Remedial/developmental courses and learning assistance programs	2,729
EOP (TRIO) programs	1,750
Total	4,479

Boylan, Hunter R. (1995)

As shown in table 1, in 1995 there were nearly 4,500 developmental education programs in existence in the U.S. The number of programs speaks volumes to the perceived need for developmental education.

Table 2: Students Participation in Developmental Eduction

Students participating in developmental education	2,209,079

Boylan, Hunter R. (1995)

Similarly, well over two million students participated in developmental education programs. Many of these programs were voluntary and many were credit bearing (see appendix 1).

Table 3: Faculty participating in Developmental Education

Personnel involved in developmental education	
Faculty	30,650
Tutors.	55,000
Counselors/advisors	10,000
EOP (TRIO) personnel	11,400
Total	107,050

Boylan, Hunter R. (1995).

Of course the numbers of programs available to American students, and indeed the numbers of students taking part in developmental education, requires a significant number of professionals to support the endeavour (see table 3). Amongst this extraordinary volume of learning support, and with the established present and historical need of our students, diluting rather than supporting CAD at AUI would go against worldwide trends towards increased developmental education.

The Fundamental Need for Developmental Education

Evidence demonstrates a clear and present need for developmental education programs as a direct result of both internal and external factors. According to Cross, (as cited in Neuburger, 1999) if such programs did not exist, only about 10% of the entering under-prepared students would be likely to graduate. This would result in "massive failure rates or an equally dramatic decline in standards" (Day & McCabe, 1997).

Research in the United States has identified specific risk characteristics associated with students' likelihood of leaving postsecondary education without attaining a credential (Horn and Premo 1995; Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormick 1996). In Morocco, risk characteristics include being linguistically, academically, and socially under-prepared; students at AUI face myriad transitional issues.

Following are the factors that admissions officers require for admission for highly selective colleges:

Table 4: Admission Criteria for Selective US Institutions

1. High School Grade Point Average (GPA)
2. SAT equivalent score
3. Credits earned during high school
4. Teacher responses to series of questions regarding student
5. Number of Extra-curricular activities in which student participated

Statistics in Brief. (1995)

These students achieved high school grade point averages (GPA) of 3.5 or higher; each of them scored 1100 or higher on the SAT; while in high school these students accumulated four credits in English, three in math, three in science, three in social science, and two in foreign language; teacher responses to a series of questions regarding these students were positive; and they participated in two or more school-related extracurricular activities (Statistics in Brief, 1995).

The risk of failure seems obvious when applied to the demographics of the new intake at AUI. The university itself operates at an unusual locus of language, culture, and purpose. For the vast majority of our students, English is a third, fourth, or fifth language. The unique history of Morocco has led to a proliferation of primary and secondary educational systems. AUI students are graduates from Moroccan-Arabic system secondary schools, Moroccan-French system secondary schools as well as Moroccan-American system secondary schools. Some have come from science stream programs and some from the humanities and social science stream. Few have taken any university placement courses.

Many of our students come to tertiary level education woefully under-prepared academically for the experience. They come from divergent social, economic and political backgrounds that can lead to the compounding of academic weaknesses with social problems. CAD was developed in response to these issues and the attendant academic challenges; its purpose is to act as a bridge between our students' pasts and their future at AUI.

It is due to AUI's unique position as an American-style English language university in a North-African, Arabic speaking country, that virtually all of our students might be seen as in need of developmental work. AUI has from its inception required multiple assessments of incoming cohorts including secondary school graduation transcripts, English, French and Arabic language proficiency as well as personal interviews to judge individual suitability to study in the AUI context. The mandatory assessments at AUI lead directly to mandatory placement into language support and CAD courses. Direct entry students (those not requiring linguistic training) are placed into CAD courses. Students are then given the option to place out of two of the CAD courses (SSK1203 and SSK1201) by examination. The vast majority do not chose this option.

Even the most highly qualified incoming student may struggle when faced with the linguistic and transitional challenges of this new environment. Some of this work must be language-based, as occurs in the Language Center; but much of it must offer support of a more diverse, hands-on, and intentionally academic nature. The solution to their global issue is not to deny developmental students admission to baccalaureate institutions; in fact, with appropriate assistance, they can and do graduate at rates equivalent to their better prepared peers.

Assessing Success

If the need for a program like CAD is clear, how can we determine whether or not we are successfully meeting those needs?

Neuburger (1999) cites research by Boylan; Kulik & Kulik; Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb that has clearly shown that participation in developmental education is a strong predictor of academic success. Participants achieve higher grades and greater persistence than found in non-participating peers and are as successful, or more successful than their academically prepared peers. Developmental students enrolled in community colleges graduate at a rate of 24%, compared to a rate of 22% of their better-prepared peers. (The National Center for Education Statistics, 1996b). At baccalaureate institutions, even though less than 30% of the developmental students would be expected to graduate (The National Center for Education Statistics, 1996b), approximately 40% of them do persist to graduation (Boylan & Bonham, 1992). At research universities, forty-eight percent (48%) of the students enrolled in developmental coursework graduate (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Neuburger, 1999) these last two figures compare closely to the national average of 45.6% of all students entering such (baccalaureate) institutions.

These results are supported in the results of a CAD self-study. Hardcastle (2003) reports that “Correlations between CAD courses and measures of GPA indicate that CAD courses act as consistent predictors of success in academic study.” The self-study also investigated student and faculty perceptions of changes in key intended learning outcomes. AUI students reported significant improvements in these skills areas. Faculty responses did not concur with student perceptions. However the report points out that faculty who had worked with AUI students before and after the introduction of CAD report ‘observable improvements’ in student attributes.

The structure of the department and the courses can also be evaluated. The following components have been identified as being associated with student success (Boylan., Bliss, and Bonham, 1997):

- presence of centralized program organizational structure,
- presence of mandatory assessment of students,
- presence of mandatory placement of students,
- availability of tutor training,
- availability of advising/counseling services, and
- presence of program evaluation.

Each of these elements exists within CAD and the Writing Center. The program has a centralized organization with a director and course coordinators. There are also coordinators of the writing center and tutoring services. This structure enables a close observation and reporting of specific student problems and enables a quick reaction time to resolve issues.

The developmental education courses provided by CAD are supported by an integral tutoring services program. Over several years CAD faculty observed excessive failure rates in certain AUI core courses and responded to student requests for assistance with the development of student-based tutoring services for these courses. The need for advising has also long been recognized in CAD. Faculty are required to hold office hours and are expected to take an active role in academic advising. Counseling is also seen as an important part of the educational experience with a part-time psychological counselor being employed by the university. This has been extended with the addition of a CAD/Student Affairs funded counselor.

In addition, a closer look at the structure and content of the five CAD courses - Skills for Learning and Research; Critical Reading and Problem Solving; Computer Skills for Independent Learning; Applied Independent Learning Methods; and Interpersonal Skills and Social Interaction - reveals our adhesion to current, even progressive, theories about student assessment. “Research repeatedly has shown that in undergraduate education there is a positive correlation between how actively engaged students are—with faculty, other students and the subject matter—and their academic success,” says McClenney, “An engaged student, for example, may meet with advisers to discuss career plans, work on projects with other students outside of class, spend a number of hours rewriting and perfecting a research paper and regularly ask questions in class” (Randal n.d.). These elements – discussion, personal

interaction, project work, and a process approach – are integral to each of the CAD courses, as we assist students in the transition from passive acquisition to creative production of knowledge.

Recent data on failure rates in CAD courses suggest an appropriate learning curve; students fail at a higher rate in the first stages of their CAD training, and begin to succeed proportional to their acquisition of skills. In both design and implementation, then, CAD adheres to the best known recommendations for learning support.

Table 4: Average Failing Rate by CAD Course (Fall 2006)

SSK1203	14.96 %
SSK1201	12.97 %
SSK1202	11.08 %
SSK1205	5.56 %
SSK1204	3.51 %
Average	9.62 %

Conclusion

The goal of CAD is to communicate the expectations and philosophy of Al Akhawayn University to incoming students; to give those students the learning skills to succeed under an entirely new educational organization; and to provide them with the foundation with which to be not passive recipients of information, but active participants in the evaluation and production of knowledge in their chosen fields.

A core curriculum should not be viewed as an equation, as merely the acquisition of points; instead, it must address the highest purposes of the university. The core curriculum reveals to the student not simply our requirements, but our philosophy, our goals, and our utter willingness to support the student during the years they are here. It is both foundation and demonstration.

The Center for Academic Development currently plays an indispensable role in this regard. We model university success for students even as we teach specific tools. Without CAD, the quality of the education offered at AUI, as well as the experience of both students and instructors, would suffer; such a situation would exemplify Casazza's idea of the false opportunity. With CAD, students are given the information and skills to utilize every resource and opportunity at the university. We are a bridge, a unifying force, and we are necessary.

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Appendix 1: Links to Example Developmental Education Programs Worldwide:

http://www.ohiou.edu/AAC/courses/

http://www.uiowa.edu/~ptimes/issues02-03/winter02-03/college.html

http://www.gwu.edu/~uwp/fyw/fyw-about.htm

http://newstudent.concordia.ca/seminars.firstyear.shtml

http://www.suu.edu/ss/success/univ1000/

http://www.mnsu.edu/fye/seminar/goals.html

http://www.sc.edu/univ101/aboutus/index.html

http://www.mtsu.edu/~studskl/index.html

http://www.qatar.vcu.edu/output/page268.asp

http://www.aur.edu/academics/course_search_registration.html

http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/writing/

http://www.aac.edu/index.php?id=214