The experience of community college for developmental students: challenges and motivations

This article adds to existing literatures on “developmental students,” or those placing into non-credit-bearing reading and/or writing classes, by exploring their own personal experiences of attending community college. The findings of this qualitative study, based on a set of semistructured interviews with 18 developmental students in community college, reveal a variety of challenges and motivations related to persistence. Challenges included multiple demands on students’ time, difficulty of classes and writing assignments, and students’ perceptions of inadequate pedagogy. Students appeared motivated to persist by the opportunity to engage new ideas and serve as a role model for friends and family members. Implications of these findings for helping developmental students persist toward their college degrees are considered.

Background and literature review

Developmental students are generally considered those community college students lacking in basic reading, writing, and/or mathematics abilities. These students are generally required to complete a number of non-credit-bearing, basic skills courses before enrolling in freshman-level English, mathematics, and science courses. Overall, fewer than 30% of community college students graduate within six years and these numbers are significantly lower for those students enrolled in developmental reading and writing classes (Adelman, 2002; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, Crosta,
Jenkins, 2007; Crosta & Calcagno, 2005). Moreover, among community college graduates, those initially assigned to developmental classes are significantly less likely to eventually earn a bachelor’s degree (Adelman, 1996). While some attribute these poor outcomes to the stigmatization that developmental students face from the larger college community, many believe that they are due to preexisting academic deficiencies and not having developed adequate preparation for college-level classes in high school (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Fox, 1999; Grubb, 1999; Richardson, 2005).

Many critics contend that the monies spent on developmental education would be better spent improving the quality of education within urban high schools and preparing developmental students for vocational positions in the workforce (Bennett, 1992; Hagedorn, Siadat, Fogel, Nora, and Pascarella, 1999; Traub, 1994, 1998). Claiming that developmental students’ limitations are simply too severe to be assuaged, many community college faculty members lament the amount of time they spend in the classroom attempting to teach students the basics of reading and writing (Grubb, 1999).

And yet, others argue that a long-standing objective of community colleges has been to provide developmental education for those students who have been failed by their secondary institutions and that there would be serious class- and race-based consequences to reducing and/or eliminating developmental education since the vast majority of developmental students are working-class students of color (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey, 2006; Grubb, 1999; Rich, 1995). These scholars, contending that developmental students are entitled to access higher education through the community college classroom, have articulated a number of effective pedagogical strategies for helping developmental students translate important ideas on to paper and engage college-level texts (Perl, 1994; Rose, 1989; Sternglass, 1997; Tsao, 2005). Moreover, they believe that a combination of active, engaging pedagogy, alongside appropriate supports and scaffolding for major reading and writing assignments, developmental students can develop basic reading and writing abilities, while concurrently grappling with discipline-specific content.

The current, qualitative study seeks to add to the above literatures concerning developmental students’ poor skill levels, inadequate preparation, and rights to access by attempting to understand how community college is experienced by a small sample of developmental students who have yet to pass the reading and/or writing proficiency exams. Specifically, the research questions grounding this study include: (a) what positive experiences (academic and nonacademic) motivate community college students
in developmental classes to persist, despite the obstacles; and (b) what academic and nonacademic challenges do developmental students believe thwart their capacities to persist in pursuit of an associate’s degree?

Methodology

A total of 18 community college students participated in the current study. In the total sample, there were eight women and 10 men. Five identified as White, one as Egyptian, three as Jamaican and/or Caribbean, two as Black or African American, one as Dominican, and six as Latino. Ages ranged from 19-47 years and the mean age was 23 years. All participants had placed into the lowest level of developmental reading and/or writing and were currently enrolled in at least one non-credit-bearing developmental-level class. All but two students grew up speaking the English language. All students were assigned pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper.

I recruited for participants within classes designated for developmental readers and writers and via flyers displayed outside areas of campus in which many students congregate. All prospective participants were informed that I was interested in learning more about community college students’ hopes, struggles, and experiences within and beyond the college classroom. All participants were compensated $10 for each hour of their time.

With each of the 18 student participants, I set up a meeting date on campus and asked them the following semistructured interview questions:

1. What classes are you taking?
2. What do you enjoy most about them?
3. Are there any struggles or challenges that you associate with attending college at this time?
4. Can you tell me about at least one positive and one negative experience that you have had at the college?
5. What has motivated you to keep going, despite the obstacles?

It should be noted that these questions were intended to serve as a general template in order to prompt a larger discussion about students’ experiences. Thus, students were encouraged to adapt these questions as needed.

1. At this college, developmental students are permitted to take some, but not all credit-bearing classes outside of English and mathematics. Generally, classes within the physical and natural sciences are closed off to these students until they place completely out of remediation.
2. Please see Appendix A for a brief chart outlining students’ remediation history and placement.
and to shape the interview in a way that felt most natural and comfortable for them.

Through an inductive, “data-driven” strategy, I sought to identify and analyze central themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first overarching theme to emerge relates to “student challenges,” which was divided into three central subthemes: (a) multiple demands on time, (b) difficulty of coursework, and (c) inadequate pedagogy. The second overarching theme encompassed “students’ motivations for persistence,” which was divided into the following two subthemes: (a) engaging ideas and (b) serving as a role model. Within this article, I highlight those excerpts that most clearly illustrated the theme (or subtheme) being discussed.

**Results**

Analyses of these qualitative interviews revealed five central challenges and two central motivations related to community college students’ experiences of developmental classes. It is important to note that I did not identify any differences based on developmental sequence (lowest level reading, lowest level writing, lowest level reading and writing), gender, or race/ethnicity. Overall, older students seemed more motivated by the desire to make contributions to the larger society (beyond friends and family) and those students in their first semester tended to speak more positively about their college experience thus far. However, unless indicated otherwise, the themes depicted below emerged across the vast majority of participants’ interviews.

**Students’ challenges**

This first section of the results highlights those central challenges that students believe make it difficult for them to persist at college and succeed in their classes. These include multiple demands on time, difficulty of coursework, and inadequate pedagogy. Overwhelmingly, students affirmed that these challenges make it less likely that they will be able to complete developmental coursework and earn their associate’s degree.

**Multiple demands on time**

Sixteen out of 18 students described copious demands on their time, which often inhibited their capacities to focus on their developmental coursework. Many students reported working more than 30 hours per week, while others serve as primary caretaker for children and other family members. For example, Ana, a 26-year-old young woman who emigrated from Jamaica as a young child, describes the serious emotional costs of
studying full time when attempting to also raise a baby, complete coursework, and ultimately earn her college degree.

I have so many things to do. I am literally going crazy. I’m taking five classes and I’m here from Monday to Saturday. And when I get home… then I have to feed my daughter, then make dinner, then clean up, go upstairs, pick up the mess she’s made, and then start my homework. It’s too much but I have to do it.

Jeannie, a 47-year-old Caribbean woman who works full time while attempting to earn a college degree, affirms that the only way to manage coursework with other responsibilities is to sacrifice sleep and keep going, even when she feels on the verge of collapse.

…When I’m home studying on my own and I, you know, [struggling with] the discipline to sit there, the commitment I’ve made, like my studying hours are crazy… I sleep, get up at 2 o’clock in the morning [to study]… My body, I don’t fall asleep… I could have given up, I could have said, ‘Oh God, look, I need to sleep, I can’t do this.’

**Difficulty of coursework and writing assignments**

Seventeen out of 18 students described the serious struggles with which they associate the difficulty of their coursework, as well as their struggles to earn a passing grade. Wilma, a 31-year-old Latina woman who grew up in New York City, describes what it feels like to “study and study” but not understand the course material. Wilma’s frustration with working hard, but not reaping the benefits, is described below:

So, when I go into a class… if it’s just reading textbooks and understanding, I don’t get it. And, I don’t understand why… When I have to read textbooks, it’s so hard for me to comprehend what I’m reading. It’s so hard, especially if it’s not multiple choice. Then I literally start to cry—I get very emotional.

Additionally, Giovanni, a 20-year-old Latino man from New York City, failed both his math and speech classes and uses words like “torture” and “brutal” to describe the experience.

Math was a torture. First of all, it was too long, three hours. That’s pure torture, I hated it… [Remedial] math, I didn’t pass… I thought I was going to pass because I knew everything but his test was brutal. The other class I failed was speech. I failed that because I stopped going to class. I hated it.

Students often described complex, academic writing assignments as their most serious impediment to succeeding in classes. Within the
current study, all but two participants placed into a non-credit-bearing, developmental writing course and all but one described writing as an extraordinarily difficult and disheartening experience. Some students described learning, unexpectedly, that they did not have the strong writing skills that they believed themselves to have before coming into the college. Others simply described writing as a “terrorizing” experience that elicited feelings of inferiority.

Parminder, a 25-year-old Middle-Eastern man, declares that “Writing is horrible, just horrible!” He describes agonizing over even very basic writing assignments and does not even attempt to respond to most in-class essay prompts. He has failed a number of English classes because he cannot submit required papers and describes his fears about writing as far worse than those associated with any other academic endeavors.

I don’t get nervous enough on a test, you know. I get anxiety maybe, you know, a little, a slight case of anxiety when I take other tests. My problem is the writing, I just get very nervous. I shut everything out and I just don’t wanna do it. I wanna get up and leave. Get it over with as soon as possible. Even if I write down the worst thing, and I know I’m gonna fail, I’d rather just finish and get out of there, just so I can feel like, OK, I don’t have the pressure anymore that I have to write this essay. And that’s it.

Additionally, Ramon, a 19-year-old man originally from the Dominican Republic, proclaims, “I don’t like writing... I don’t get along with writing essays. I don’t know why.” Moreover, Ana feels angry that the standards held to writing seem so much higher than those required of everyday speech. Although confident in everyday speaking abilities, Ana feels insecure about having even a basic command of the English language (even though her native language is English) when putting pen to paper. She says, “Writing sucks... What I (write) is not proper English... I miss certain words and cannot move my thoughts on to the page.”

Perceptions of inadequate pedagogy

More than half of students in the current study lamented what they perceive of as inferior teaching practices among their instructors. Central complaints included few opportunities to connect course material with their own lived experiences, inadequate delivery of course material, and an apparent disinterest in students’ learning. For example, Parminder is critical of instructors who rely too heavily on textbooks and therefore, fail to tailor lectures to students’ personal interests and investments.
I mean I have [a science class] right now. I barely attend class. Because she just, what’s in the textbook, she yaps through it, word for word… She puts slides on the computer… she just puts the textbook, page after page after page. So [after the professor takes attendance], I run down to the library… what is she doing that I can’t get from the book?

Similarly, Giovanni argues that instructors in developmental classrooms often fail to prepare students adequately and demonstrate little interest in teaching.

Sometimes the teachers don’t make the time… Some of them don’t care. They just want the paycheck, which is unfortunate, but it happens… [one teacher] was so lazy and so disorganized. She would forget to bring tests to the classroom. One of the students complained about her, and I overheard her after class saying, ‘Please don’t tell on me, I need this job to pay for my car.’

Later in the interview, Giovanni also complained about what he views as instructors’ insensitivities to students’ needs. Specifically, Giovanni relayed his experiences with a speech professor who apparently failed to recognize students’ anxieties around publicly speaking and presenting within the classroom.

The other class I failed was speech. I failed that because I stopped going to class. I hated it. The teacher as so intimidating. It was hard to get up in front of the class… the teacher was scary… She didn’t make you feel comfortable, she was so intimidating. So, I dropped out.

**Student motivation for persistence**

Despite the obstacles outlined above, students reported two central motivators for persisting in college and attempting to earn their degrees. First, students discussed an intrinsic yearning to learn and develop intellectually that has yet to be documented in previous studies of community colleges (Clydesdale, 2007; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999; Weis, 1985). These intrinsic motivations for learning superseded those financial and/or practical motivations to attend college that have been discussed previously. In addition, students affirmed that they were motivated by the opportunity to make their family members proud and serve as a role model for those friends and acquaintances who had yet to attend college themselves.

**Intrinsic desires to learn**

All but one student in the current study affirmed that they were motivated to persist by their desires to develop intellectually and grapple with the many interesting and challenging ideas that their college classes had
to offer. For example, Jeannie, affirms that college classes afford the opportunity to keep her mind active and to have a “chance to live” that she had previously been denied. Rather than feeling motivated to attend college in pursuit of a career change or higher salary, Jeannie asserts that she is driven by the desire for a lifetime of learning.

So I think being in school is, is something valuable to my life... I have learned so much. You know, learning so much and that’s why I use the term ‘ever-learning.’... I like the ever-learning, that you learn so much. You’re learning from your peers, you’re learning from your professors, you’re learning and it’s giving a chance to live... I think it’s a livelihood, because you know your brain is calculating... I don’t know how to sit and do absolutely nothing.

Similarly, Parminder affirms that he is not extraordinarily motivated by concrete incentives such as high grades or the opportunity for a higher paying salary. Rather, he is excited by the opportunity to engage “big ideas” and find connections with his own lived experiences. Parminder describes a physics course in which the instructor connected course material with the temperature of the classroom.3 Despite resistance from friends ("You sound like an idiot"), Parminder insists on thinking further about these ideas and discussing them with friends and family.

This physics class... you really wanna go there, you’re very interested... I got As, but not only was I happy about the As... it’s just really interesting though 'cause the professor would turn around and tell you things... like that’s why the heat is always on, or the, the air conditioner is always on, it’s because the heat is always attracted to the cold, so it, it gives you something to think about and enjoy and, you know, listen to it. It’s interesting.

Serving as a role model

In addition to students’ motivations to engage in ideas and develop intellectually, the majority also affirmed that they were highly motivated by an opportunity to make friends and family members proud of them and to serve as a role model for those who were considering attending college in the future. For example, Dell, a 19-year-old African American man, affirms that the most important element of attending college is the opportunity to bring his family with him. In fact, he envisions using his college degree to improve the quality of their lives, as much as his own.

3. As mentioned earlier, developmental students are generally prohibited from taking courses in the natural and physical sciences; Parminder was granted special permission to take this course.
I wanna start my own career. I wanna be successful with life. I wanna like, fix computers, you know, be a computer engineer... I wanted to start something that my family, none of my family went to college. Like, like, for my mom, my dad, my grandma. I’m the only one who went to college, so I just wanna make them feel proud. I wanna do this, not only for myself, but for them too. ’Cause everything I do, I do it for them too.

Dell also describes feeling motivated by the opportunity to serve as a role model for his best friend Jessica’s younger brother, who is 13 years old and enrolled in a public junior high school. Dell affirms that

this kid is like family to me... if I show him I’m going to college, it might help him to do the same... right now he isn’t even attending classes.” Furthermore, Dell affirms that his own motivations to persist are enhanced by the realization that he cannot motivate Jessica’s brother to attend college without putting forth a serious effort himself.

Similarly, Christine, a 34-year-old woman from New York City, affirms that she is highly motivated to remain in college so that she can encourage her close friend Diane (who is also her sponsor in a 12-step recovery program) to attend college. Christine frequently encourages Diane, who currently works as a waitress, to recognize the possibility of school as a vehicle for success and warns her that “working on your feet will get tougher when you get older.” She often urges Diane to “give it a try” and “don’t give up if you don’t feel comfortable right away” and believes that her success in classes is the best way to show Diane that she, too, is capable of earning a college degree.

Finally, Jeannie affirms that a central motivator for attending college is to encourage her 21-year-old son, Manley, to do the same. During the semester, Jeannie often invites Manley to sit in on classes and meet with “nice professors,” who will not intimidate him. Overall, Jeannie asserts that her persistence is inextricably linked with her hopes for Manley to eventually matriculate and earn a college degree. Interestingly, Jeannie also discussed the benefits of attending college (and in particular, psychology classes) for helping her to be more patient with Manley, as he grapples with the decision of whether or not to attend college. She affirms that her psychology classes have helped her to understand that “not everyone moves at the same pace” and that “unconditional positive regard” and “reinforcement” will be more effective motivators for her son than threats and punishments.
Conclusions

Overall, this study highlights the importance of exploring developmental students’ experiences of the college classroom and the particular challenges that they face. The following are a few modest implications of these data for allaying some of their concerns and working more effectively with developmental students. And yet, it is also worth noting the possibility that the experiences outlined above are not confined exclusively to students at the developmental level since almost all entering community college students are basic writers who are less likely to graduate than their four-year counterparts. Hence, if we assume that these themes generalize across community college students, then perhaps the following strategies might be utilized to promote success among nondevelopmental students as well.

First, in response to students’ considerable anxieties concerning exams, instructors might consider carving out time early in the semester to elucidate various studying strategies, such as developing study guides and distinguishing main concepts from those that are less central to the course material. Admittedly, this takes time away from delivery of the course material, but I find it an effective way of teaching students how to learn, which should serve them well throughout their academic careers. Another useful strategy involves providing some short-answer and essay questions that will appear on exams ahead of time. This not only focuses their studying on the more central concepts, but also allows us to be more rigorous in our evaluation. Finally, a “freshman success” course that focuses on study skills and time management might also help students feel better prepared for college-level coursework and exams.

In response to students’ concerns about writing, many teachers and scholars scaffold assignments in such a way that students have opportunities to freewrite their own ideas and summarize central texts before they move forward toward a deeper level of analysis (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Perl, 1994). This enables students to complete the work in stages, which not only mitigates anxieties around completing the entire paper, but also affords them a solid foundation to draw upon when they begin to engage more complex ideas. Other scholars have suggested that a large portion of developmental students’ disdain stems from their association between writing and poor grades. Hence, they suggest that instructors begin with positive feedback (commenting specifically about what they “like” about a piece and encouraging students to “do more of that”) and hold off on assigning grades until students have had greater opportunities for revision (Elbow, 1993; Perl, 1994).
Students’ concerns about inadequate pedagogy warrant a couple of possible interpretations. On the one hand, some of their classes probably lack the sort of dynamic interplay and exciting exchange of ideas needed for students to remain engaged. Professional development meetings that focus on active pedagogy might ameliorate some of these problems and help students to feel more satisfied with their classroom experiences. And yet, it is also possible that some pedagogical complaints are tied to students’ anxieties around exams and writing assignments. By assuaging those concerns through utilization of the above strategies (or others), students might articulate fewer pedagogical concerns. Finally, it is worth noting the likelihood that many complaints about pedagogy stem from disparate ideas about what makes for effective teaching and learning (Cox, 2009). For example, novice learners often assume that effective teaching means giving students the “right answers” that they need to retain, whereas veteran learners (i.e., the faculty) believe that skilled teaching requires that the learner reach his or her own conclusions and develop more abstract understandings of difficult concepts. Thus, it might help if both faculty and students begin the term with a discussion of what makes for effective teaching and learning and decide collaboratively about the sorts of practice that will best facilitate students’ mastery of the course material. Even if students and faculty do not ultimately reach the ideal agreement (or compromise), at least students will have greater insights into why they often encounter pedagogical practices with which they are unfamiliar.

Obviously, it would be considerably more difficult to help students manage those additional obligations such as working full time and raising children, which often impede their capacities to follow through with their schoolwork. In fact, outside of providing weekly planners and attempting to help students determine how they might manage study demands alongside other obligations, these struggles might be outside of our power to truly alter (Hagedorn, Siadat, Fogel, Nora, and Pascarella, 1999). However, we might help students who contend with multiple responsibilities by disavowing the notion that students who take longer than six years to earn their associate’s degree have somehow failed to move forward and/or succeed in the community college system. In fact, this push toward a more expeditious time-to-degree might inadvertently compel students to take more classes than is realistic given their real-life responsibilities. Moreover, an overabundance of classes and responsibilities probably does not afford students the time and energy needed to develop the sorts of reading and writing abilities that will ultimately carry them through their college careers. Thus, I argue that by moving away from an emphasis on full-time course schedules and “timely graduation rates,” we might ulti-
mately set our students up for better (albeit not more expedient) long-term outcomes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge many student complaints were aimed at those credit-bearing classes outside of their developmental reading and writing sequences (often referred to as “content courses”). Therefore, some might suggest denying students’ access to the majority of credit-bearing content courses until after they have completed their developmental sequences. (Developmental readers and writers are already denied access to the majority of mathematics and physical sciences classes until the completion of developmental sequences.) While stronger reading and writing abilities would undoubtedly help these students to succeed in credit-bearing “content classes,” I worry that denying their opportunity to earn some credits from the outset might further discourage developmental students’ persistence. Therefore, I argue that instead of denying access, we need to continue striving for additional ways to support developmental students’ success in credit-bearing classes from the outset. One possibility that has already been successful at a number of community colleges involves the creation of “Learning Community” courses that integrate students’ developmental English and credit-bearing content classes so that the reading and writing required within the content class is supported within multiple settings (Tinto, 1997; Scrivener et al., 2008). Moreover, the social support, smaller class sizes, and individualized attention provided within learning communities appear particularly helpful for developmental students attempting to earn college credits early on (Price, 2005).

In conclusion, it appears that developmental students in community college contend with a variety of personal and academic struggles, which make it difficult for them to travel seamlessly and expeditiously toward graduation. The above strategies are intended to serve as a brief (non-comprehensive) proposal for supporting students through some of these central challenges. It is worth noting that we might also capitalize on the strong motivations that students already carry with them into the college, such as the desire to develop a more formidable intellectual identity and serve as a role model for friends and family members. As faculty, we might aid students by finding ways of reinforcing these motivators, especially during those most precarious and overwhelming moments of the semester for our students. Moreover, given the apparent importance of others in students’ efforts to persist, we might also consider inviting those folks for whom our students serve as role models and caretakers to visit our classes and become members of our larger community. In other
words, by finding a place for these friends and family members, we buttress the notion of our own students’ belonging.

Given the complexity of our students’ lives and the fact that the current data undoubtedly reveal only the tip of the iceberg regarding our students’ lived experiences within and beyond the college classroom, I hope that this study encourages other community college researchers and practitioners to learn more about our students’ lives, challenges, and motivations. Ultimately, these newfound insights will be an essential step in helping students along this arduous, oftentimes overwhelming, and ultimately rewarding journey through higher education.

References


Appendix A: Student information

Please note that all students originally placed into the lowest level reading and/or writing developmental classes. The majority was in their first two years at the college and remained within their original developmental sequence. The majority of these students were also required to take developmental mathematics, but this was not recorded systematically.

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