Perceptions of Students in Developmental Classes

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The number of students enrolling in colleges and universities requiring remedial programs is increasing. Developmental courses are used to increase student academic skills. Understanding how students perceive their placement and experience in developmental courses can provide valuable insight for high schools, community colleges, and universities on meeting the needs of this growing population. In this phenomenological study, the experiences of three community college students who participated in developmental courses on community college campuses in Texas were examined through use of an individual interview protocol. Five themes emerged from the data analyses: (a) affective perceptions, (b) academic perceptions, (c) behaviors, (d) resources, and (e) perceived benefits. Implications for high schools and developmental program coordinators are included. Keywords: college readiness, college preparedness, developmental education, mathematics, reading, science

Introduction

A 19-year-old male student currently enrolled in a developmental writing course described his feelings about being required to take the remedial course as follows:

Well, I wasn’t very happy. I mean, I didn’t take honors or AP classes in high school, but I kind of felt like if I could pass regular classes in high school, then I should be able to go on to college. If you know enough to graduate from high school, that really should be enough to get you into college.

The number of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary courses is increasing (Brown & Conley, 2007). Numerous researchers (e.g., Barnes
& Slate, 2010; Conley, 2008a, 2008b; Hall & Ponton, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008) have identified specific skills and abilities that are necessary for student success in college and have identified characteristics of high school programs that increase student preparedness for college (Cline, Bissell, Hafner, & Katz, 2007). Unfortunately, despite collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions, some researchers (Greene & Forster, 2003) have documented that less than one third of all high school graduates are college-ready in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. For the state of Texas, in which this study was conducted, similar percentages of students were determined to be college-ready in reading, math, and in both subjects (Barnes & Slate, 2011). When under-prepared students are admitted into colleges, developmental coursework is utilized to close performance gaps (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).

Increasing numbers of students enter college lacking the prerequisite academic skills to be successful in postsecondary education (Hall & Ponton, 2005), and developmental coursework must meet the needs of diverse students to ensure future success in academic endeavors (Aycaster, 2001). Moreover, many students entering college are required to take multiple levels of developmental coursework (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008). The National Association for Developmental Education (2010, p. 1) defined developmental education as “a comprehensive process that focuses on the intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development of all students,” and numerous quantitative studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of developmental programs (Aycaster, 2001). Other researchers (e.g., Wadsworth, Husman, Duggan, & Pennington, 2007) have identified instructional practices that are most effective with adult learners in developmental programs. Unfortunately, little qualitative research has been conducted to examine student perceptions about their experiences in developmental programs.

**Review of the literature**

Several researchers (e.g., Aycaster, 2001; Boylan & Bonham, 2007) have determined that 78% of universities that enroll freshmen and almost 100% of public two-year institutions offer developmental courses to under-prepared students. In longitudinal studies increases have been documented in the rate of students requiring remedial courses (Attewell et al., 2006). Moreover, Bailey et al. (2008) determined that less than 40% of students who were identified as requiring multiple developmental courses to address academic deficits actually completed the sequence.
Multiple dimensions of college readiness

Greene and Forster (2003) reasoned that Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) scores provide an assessment of the basic skills relevant to college readiness; however, they added that this information taken in isolation does not adequately assess college preparedness. To examine the multiple dimensions of college readiness, researchers analyzed data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics on a sample of 198 high school graduates. Greene and Forster (2003) conducted a readiness evaluation by applying three screens to the student data to determine college readiness. In the first screen, students had to have completed high school. The second screen involved a review of student transcripts to determine if students had taken the minimum coursework required for admission to four-year colleges including four years of English, three years of math, and two years each of natural science, social science, and foreign language. Basic reading skills using National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test scores were examined in the third screen. Only 32% of high school graduates left high school with sufficient skills to be successful in college. Most students who were eliminated from the readiness group were excluded because they had not completed the appropriate coursework. Greene and Forster (2003) argued that this method for assessing college readiness was more accurate than relying solely on SAT or ACT scores.

Recently, Barnes, Slate, and Rojas-LeBouef (2010) argued that college readiness as defined by scores on standardized tests such as the ACT or SAT is a very narrow and limiting definition. In their article, they contended that college readiness as defined by test scores was academic preparedness and not college readiness, per se. Barnes et al. (2010) described college readiness as not only academic preparedness but also study skills, emotional maturity, and knowledge of educational finance, among other variables. Conley (2008a, 2008b) theorized that college readiness is comprised of four key elements: cognitive reasoning strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behavior, and contextual skills. Furthermore, Conley (2008a) stated that college-ready students were able to formulate and solve problems, conduct research, and interpret information. Additionally, Conley (2008a, 2008b) indicated that successful students demonstrated the contextual knowledge and skills that were required to navigate the college admissions process. Similar to Greene and Forster (2003), Conley (2008a, 2008b) speculated that far fewer students were adequately prepared for college when a multidimensional model for college readiness was applied.
Byrd and MacDonald (2005) conducted a qualitative study of non-traditional, first-generation college students to examine the concept of college readiness. Eight participants were selected who had previously earned associate degrees from community colleges, who were classified as juniors or seniors in a liberal arts program, and who were older than 25. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) utilized partially structured interviews to identify essential skills for college readiness. The results of the Byrd and MacDonald qualitative study paralleled the findings from Conley (2008b) and Greene and Forster (2003). All participants acknowledged the importance of prerequisite academic skills, but they also identified several self-regulating behaviors that were necessary for success in college. The nontraditional students identified time management, goal setting, and self-advocacy as critical attributes for success at the postsecondary level. Six out of the eight participants reported that they did not have the necessary skills for success immediately upon graduation from high school. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) suggested that colleges should teach young college students readiness skills in order to ensure the students’ success.

Reid and Moore (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 13 first-generation college students (i.e., six men and seven women) from the same urban high school to examine student perceived strengths and weaknesses of their preparation for college. During high school, all of the students had at least a 2.5 grade point average (GPA), and seven out of the 13 had a 3.5 or higher. Researchers utilized written biographical questionnaires and conducted individual semistructured interviews to collect data. All participants emphasized the importance of taking rigorous high school coursework. Eight of the 13 participants reported taking at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in high school and all of the eight students who participated in the AP program felt that it was beneficial. Three of the students who did not participate in AP courses reported that they would advise incoming high school freshmen to enroll in AP courses. Although all of the students had performed well in high school, many of the students reported deficits in study skills and in time management relative to college standards. Reid and Moore’s (2008) study of the transition of good high school students to college revealed that these students experienced many of the same challenges as nontraditional, first-generation college students studied by Byrd and MacDonald (2005). In both studies, the need was demonstrated for students to take more rigorous coursework in high school, develop study skills, and learn strategies for time management.
Role of developmental education

Many researchers (e.g., Barnes & Slate, 2011; Barnes et al., 2010; Cline et al., 2007; Conley, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Spence, 2009) have argued that a substantial difference exists between college eligibility and college readiness. College eligibility implies that students have met minimum requirements for admission, whereas college readiness indicates that students are adequately prepared to be successful in college coursework. Conley (2008a, 2008b) theorized that the four key elements of college readiness are cognitive reasoning strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behavior, and contextual skills. When students are admitted into college with insufficient skills, remediation is required so that unprepared students can develop the skills necessary for them to meet their long-term educational goals (Boylan & Bonham, 2007).

Aycaster (2001) argued that remediation is a core function of college and universities. Furthermore, Aycaster (2001) suggested that some alternatives to providing remedial courses included increased unemployment, welfare participation, and incarceration. Education is a means for individuals to improve their employability and earning potential. As such, remediation of skill deficits is a necessary function of community colleges and universities in order to assist individuals in meeting their potential.

Characteristics of developmental students

Despite high schools’ efforts to prepare students for college, some students admitted to college have insufficient reading, writing, or mathematics skills. In these situations, developmental courses are frequently required so that unprepared students can develop these prerequisite academic skills. Attewell et al. (2006) reviewed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) and established that 40% of traditional college students took at least one remedial course. Students were more likely to take a developmental mathematics course than a remedial course in reading or writing. Moreover, students who completed developmental coursework took slightly longer to finish their degrees than students who did not take developmental courses. Young and Ley (2003) contended that the needs of developmental students are unique and that instructors should be charged with meeting the needs of diverse learners. In addition, Hall and Ponton (2005) suggested that many students placed in developmental classes feel a stigma that is damaging to self-perceptions. Moreover, the researchers recommended
that educators need to be aware of the effect of placement on student self-efficacy.

**Characteristics of effective developmental programs**

Merisotis and Phipps (2000) identified three strategies for improving the effectiveness of remediation in higher education. First, the researchers proposed that institutions should engage in collaborative studies to identify essential characteristics of effective remedial programs. Second, remediation programs should be comprehensive and should include a procedure for assessment and placement, clearly defined curriculum goals and objectives, supportive services, and a method for assessing effectiveness. Finally, remedial programs should incorporate the use of technology and remedial software programs to support students.

Hall and Ponton (2005) suggested that teaching methodologies employed in developmental programs should be designed to address academic deficits as well as self-awareness of increased ability. The researchers contended that many developmental instructors attempted to use the same methodology with developmental students as with students with higher self-efficacy. Hall and Ponton argued that developmental educators should follow the principles and theories of adult learning and development. Moreover, Galbraith and Jones (2006) posited that developmental instructors are charged with utilizing the art of teaching to appeal to student intellect, emotion, philosophy, and personal goals. Similarly, Wadsworth et al. (2007) suggested that developmental students need direct instruction in cognitive strategies and added that the future success for students is dependent on learning new strategies to increase learning.

**Purpose of the study**

Substantial pressure has been exerted by politicians to reduce the need for and costs associated with developmental programs, Aycaster (2001) proposed that good developmental programs are no more expensive than poor ones. More research is needed to improve the quality of developmental programs (Attewell et al., 2006; Aycaster, 2001; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Understanding how individual students perceive their experience in developmental courses can add to the body of knowledge on characteristics of effective programs. Consequently, the purpose of this research was to examine students’ perceptions about their experiences in a sequence of developmental courses offered at community colleges. The primary research question considered in this investigation was, What is the lived experience of students attending developmental classes at a com-
Community college? From the data collected, the researchers hoped to answer two additional questions: (a) How do students perceive developmental classes as helping to meet their long-term educational goals? and (b) How do student perceptions about their academic skills change as a result of taking developmental classes?

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for this research study was Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. In 1993, Bandura suggested that an individual’s perceived self-efficacy contributes significantly to their academic development. This theory is related to the issue of developmental education because many students enrolled in remedial coursework have doubts about their ability to achieve academically. Bandura (1993) asserted that efficacy influences how students feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. The relationship between the perceptions of students about their academic abilities and their ability to think and motivate themselves is critical to student success in developmental courses.

**Method**

A qualitative method was utilized with the intent of exploring the essence of student experiences in developmental courses. Specifically, a phenomenological case study with multiple cases was undertaken. Polkinghorne (1989) described phenomenological research as a means for providing a clear and articulate description of a shared experience. Bracketing is the process of setting aside a researcher’s assumptions and prior experiences about the topic being investigated (Fischer, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). As educators who have experience working with students with academic deficits, it was necessary for the researchers to recognize and attempt to bracket personal experiences.

**Participants**

Creswell (2007) asserted that the intent in qualitative research is to collect detailed information from several individuals. More specifically, Dukes (1984) and more recently, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), recommended that phenomenological studies should include three to 10 subjects. Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select participants for this study; in particular, a criterion sampling scheme was utilized to identify three college students (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants (i.e., one female and two males) in this study met two criteria:
(a) graduated from an accredited high school and (b) were currently enrolled in a sequence of developmental courses at a community college in the state of Texas. Participant One, a female, was enrolled in her second developmental math course. Participant Two, a male, was enrolled in his second developmental math course. The third participant was a male repeating a developmental writing course.

Context

The context of this study was to examine student experiences with developmental programs offered at community colleges in Texas. Each of the participants was required to enroll in a developmental class based on their performance on college placement exams. The developmental classes were taught on a community college campus by college faculty; however, the courses did count for college credit.

Data Collection

Upon approval by the university’s Institutional Review Board, each participant was contacted by the senior author to establish a mutually convenient time to complete the interviews in the participants’ homes. At the onset of each initial meeting, the purpose of the study was explained and informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to conducting the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and they were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for data relevant to the research questions. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants via e-mail to allow them to comment or correct the text.

Instrumentation. An interview protocol (Appendix A) was developed to examine the experiences of students attending developmental classes at community colleges. The work of Carlson and McCaslin (2003) provided a framework for the development of the interview questions. We posited that interview questions should be broad enough to encourage participants to describe their experiences but narrow enough to provide specific data related to the research topic. Additionally, questions were sequenced to facilitate a normal conversational flow (Carlson & McCaslin, 2003). Interview questions were framed by Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy and emerged from a review of the literature. A draft of the interview protocol was peer reviewed for clarity and alignment to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The complete interview protocol is presented in the Appendix.
Procedure. Persons who met inclusion criteria were identified by the senior author who requested their participation in the study. Interviews were conducted over a four-week period in the participants’ homes. The basic questions were the same for all participants; however, additional questions were interjected as needed to clarify or to extend a participant’s response. Member checking was utilized to verify contents of transcripts and to clarify meaning. Recordings of interviews were erased upon completion of transcripts to protect participant identity.

Data analysis
Interview transcriptions included detailed descriptions of the experiences of individual participants taking developmental courses. Two strategies for data analysis were employed. Initially, constant comparison analysis was used to identify underlying themes. Leech and Onwueguzie (2007) described this approach as inductive wherein codes emerge from the data. As recommended by Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996), the first cycle of coding began with a holistic reading of transcripts to identify general ideas. Key phrases were highlighted on each of the transcripts and were transferred to index cards. The second cycle of coding involved higher-level analysis whereby common patterns and trends emerged as a result of synthesis of the interview transcripts. Finally, the index cards containing key phrases from interview transcripts were color-coded and sorted into the various themes.

A second data analysis method was employed to verify the themes that were identified by constant comparison. The second method of data analysis was classical content analysis, whereby the number of times each theme was referenced was counted (Leech & Onwueguzie, 2007). To perform classical content analysis, the participant portion of interview transcripts were copied into a Word document. Then, a web-based program was utilized to determine the frequency of every word in the transcripts. Data were then transferred into a spreadsheet program and filtered by frequency. Finally, words with similar meanings were combined (e.g., teacher, professor, instructor) into clusters to confirm previously identified themes.

Credibility
One of the challenges in qualitative research is to demonstrate credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies were employed to improve the credibility of this study; specifically, peer review, member checking, and
triangulation were utilized. These techniques illustrate our commitment to maintaining methodological rigor.

**Peer review.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the use of peer review as an external check in the development of the methodology for qualitative study. Peer review was utilized in the development of the interview protocol to check for clarity of questions and alignment to research questions. In addition, peer review was used in the data analysis stage to verify themes identified through constant comparison.

**Member checking.** Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) identified member checking as a strategy for enhancing interpretive validity. Member checking is a technique in which participants review the researcher’s data for accuracy. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcript of the interview was e-mailed to each participant for verification purposes.

**Triangulation of data analysis.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified triangulation as a method used to increase the likelihood that findings are credible. Examples of triangulation include the use of multiple sources of data, methods, or investigators. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggested the use of multiple data analysis techniques as a means to increase validity of results. Triangulation was employed during the analysis of data stage by incorporating constant comparison, classical content analysis, and peer review to confirm identified themes.

**Results**

In this investigation, we sought to describe the lived experiences of students enrolled in developmental courses at community colleges in the state of Texas. Interviews were conducted with students to examine their perceptions about the effect of developmental programs on their academic skills and the role of these programs in helping students to meet their long-term educational goals. Analysis of interview transcripts revealed the emergence of five major themes. Under two themes, subthemes became apparent. The five meta-themes that emerged consisted of: (a) affective perceptions, (b) academic perceptions, (c) behaviors, (d) resources, and (e) perceived benefits. Table 1 includes examples of important statements and their corresponding codes.
Table 1. Selected Samples of Emergent Themes From the Experiences of Students in Developmental Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can’t believe I am in developmental, I’m a dummy.</td>
<td>Affective Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t even mind the stigma of being in a developmental class.</td>
<td>Affective Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had always struggled with the math.</td>
<td>Academic Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, my thoughts have changed. I am not a bad writer.</td>
<td>Academic Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did my homework to reinforce the process.</td>
<td>Behavior (Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like that she compliments the things that I did well and offered suggestions for how it could be better.</td>
<td>Behavior (Teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a writing lab that you can go to for help with your papers.</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would go to the math lab before a test because it was free tutoring.</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental writing will help me do better in my other classes.</td>
<td>Perceived Benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me to be prepared and to be successful.</td>
<td>Perceived Benefit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1: Affective perceptions

Affective perceptions were a common theme in the interviews of participants. Each individual articulated strong feelings about their developmental experience and each indicated that their feelings changed throughout their enrollment in the developmental course. A pattern was observed in the times in which emotions changed. As a result, the theme of affective perceptions was divided into three subthemes, which represent the periods of time when participant perceptions changed. The three subthemes were: (a) initial reaction, (b) the experience, and (c) afterthoughts.

**Initial reaction.** During the interview, all participants expressed negative feelings related to learning that they would be required to take developmental coursework. Specifically, both male participants expressed disappointment that their high school experience had not prepared them adequately for college. The female participant reported, “Oh my God, I can’t believe I am in Developmental. Oh, I’m a dummy.” Furthermore, the female participant described feeling a “stigma” associated with the placement.

**The experience.** Participants reported both positive and negative feelings related to the actual experience of participating in the class. Positive feelings were reported by all three students and included specific praise
about their instructors. Additionally, each of the participants reported increased self-confidence in their academic abilities. The third participant described a positive experience in developmental writing: “I like that she complimented the things that I did well.” and “I didn’t need to be embarrassed about my writing.”

Negative feelings were primarily associated with academic difficulty and feeling a lack of support. The second participant successfully completed his first developmental math class but expressed concern about his progress in the second developmental math class. The student described feeling frustrated by limited assistance available in the Extended Learning Center: “When I go there, the tutors are already helping other people, and they can only help you out on about one problem. Which I actually need a lot of help to see it.”

Afterthoughts. Reflections on completed coursework were generally favorable. The female participant reported, “The experience was extremely beneficial to me.” and “By taking the developmental course, it helped me to be prepared and to be successful.” The third participant, who did not successfully complete his first attempt at developmental writing, reported, “I felt really bad that I didn’t pass, but I did learn an important lesson and that is that I have to stick to the assignment.” Even though the student did not experience academic success in his first attempt, he was able to identify a valuable lesson that he learned as a result.

Theme 2: Academic perceptions

Participants discussed their initial academic abilities and the changes in their academic skills that were attributed to completion of a developmental course. Each of the participants acknowledged specific academic deficits that resulted in their placement in developmental coursework. Two of the three students expressed concern and frustration that their high school experience had not adequately prepared them to be successful in college coursework. With respect to his math skills, the second participant stated, “I should have learned it a little better in high school.”

In addition, students expressed the belief that their academic skills were better as a result of taking the developmental course and each participant described gains in academic confidence. Specifically, the third participant reported, “I know that what I wrote was better than anything I wrote in high school.” Similarly, the female participant stated, “I made an A, and I realized that I did have the ability to learn math.” All three
participants, regardless of their grade in the course, reported increases in academic skills.

**Theme 3: Behavior**

Each of the participants identified specific behaviors that contributed to their success. Some of these behaviors were student initiated, whereas others were teacher initiated. Consequently, the emerging theme of behavior was divided into two subthemes: student behavior and teacher behavior.

**Student behavior.** Identified student behaviors included a commitment to the completion of homework, the use of available resources for additional support, and a willingness to persist despite challenges. The female participant reported, “When I did my homework, I reinforced the process.” One of the male participants successfully completed his first developmental math class but feared that he may not pass the second course in the sequence. His interview indicated a willingness to persist despite difficulty: “I guess if I fail the class, I can take it again and try to get a better teacher.” In addition, all three students communicated a commitment to utilizing multiple resources provided by the college to meet their goals.

**Teacher behaviors.** All three participants identified specific teacher behaviors that the students considered beneficial. Some of the teachers’ behaviors that students identified as helpful included responding to questions by e-mail, maintaining an open-door policy, and the use of particular instructional strategies. The female participant reported that the professor made sure that students understood the problem solving process. Similarly, the developmental writing student said, “I like that she complimented the things that I did well and offered suggestions for how it could be better.” In addition, the developmental writing professor utilized peer editing as a strategy, and the student reported “being able to read other people’s papers helps me to see that I don’t write that bad.”

Only one participant identified specific teacher behavior that he did not perceive as beneficial. The male developmental math student expressed frustration with the use of technology in his class, specifically, “The teacher this semester uses the computer more, and you have to enter problems on the computer, and I have a hard time doing that. I have taken some outcomes before, and uh, I have inputted the answers in wrong, but I actually knew the answer. It’s like you really need to know your technology before you go in.”
Theme 4: Resources

Students identified several resources that they routinely accessed for academic assistance. In addition to direct contact with instructors through office hours or e-mail, each participant indicated that they had taken advantage of extended learning centers, math lab, writing lab, and tutoring. The participant enrolled in developmental writing indicated that he had not utilized the writing lab during his first semester of developmental writing. When asked why, he responded:

I am not sure if I didn’t go because I thought I was good and didn’t need it or if I just wasn’t comfortable yet letting other people read my stuff. I think that when I started letting my classmates read my papers and got some feedback, I kind of started to think that what I wrote wasn’t bad, and I didn’t need to be embarrassed about my writing. So now, I go to the writing lab after my classmates have read a paper to almost like get a second opinion on what needs to be changed. The people there are very helpful with fixing things like commas, spelling, and stuff.

Each of the students identified the use of college supports as key to their success. However, the second participant reported that the assistance available in the extended learning center was somewhat limited as the center was frequently overcrowded.

Theme 5: Perceived benefits

All three participants readily acknowledged that their preliminary academic skills included deficits and indicated that the developmental courses were beneficial in acquiring academic skills necessary to meet their long-term educational goals. When asked how the developmental course supported their goals, the participant enrolled in the writing class reported:

Well, I want to be a vet so my goal is to get into Texas A&M. Because I didn’t take honors or AP classes in high school and wasn’t in the top 10%, I couldn’t get into A&M, so I have to get my basics out of the way and then transfer in. I guess the developmental writing class will help me do better in my other classes because I will have to write at least a little bit in every class.

Individual interviews with students about their experiences participating in developmental courses revealed some commonalities. With time, all three students came to view their experience as beneficial in increasing
their academic skills and as a positive step toward meeting their long-term educational goals.

Discussion

In this study, the lived experiences of three students enrolled in developmental courses at community colleges in Texas, how student perceptions about academic skills change as a result of taking developmental courses, and the role of developmental classes in helping students to meet their long-term educational goals were examined. Mentioned in the literature is the recommendation that developmental college programs should meet the academic and affective needs of students. As suggested by Ay caster (2001), the participants of this study perceived benefits from participation in developmental programs when they experienced increased self-efficacy and academic skills.

Hall and Ponton (2005) described a stigma felt by students as a result of placement in developmental programs. Similarly, the three participants involved in this study reported negative feelings upon learning that they would be required to complete developmental coursework. Consequently, despite initial reactions that were somewhat negative all three participants subsequently identified some positive outcomes associated with their experience.

Through use of Bandura’s (1993) theory of self-efficacy, we believe that a relationship exists between student beliefs about themselves, their motivation, and ultimately their behavior. Participants in this study reported that they became more confident as they experienced success in their developmental courses with the assistance of supportive professors and college resources. Each of the participants appeared to become motivated to succeed as evidenced by their persistence and behaviors, such as availing themselves to resources provided by the community college intended to provide academic support. Even when faced with failure, two of the students expressed a belief that they would take the course again and identified new strategies that they would employ to increase the likelihood of success. These findings are consistent with Bandura’s (1993) theory of self-efficacy.

An additional, albeit unintended, finding was that several students became increasingly aware of their individual learning styles and were able to articulate preferences for particular instructional activities that aligned to their learning styles. Preferred activities included the use of cooperative learning and peer editing to review compositions. Additionally, one par-
participant indicated a clear preference for a nontechnology-based approach to developmental math. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to inform decisions of high school personnel and developmental program coordinators.

Implications for high schools

All three participants were placed in developmental programs due to academic deficits after graduating from high school. Several researchers (e.g., Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Greene & Forster, 2003; Reid & Moore, 2008) have suggested that high school counselors should encourage students to pursue the most rigorous coursework available, such as AP classes, prior to graduation. In addition to the academic benefits of participating in more challenging courses, students would have an opportunity to develop better study and time management skills prior to enrolling in college. Furthermore, high schools should work to improve the alignment of high school curriculum standards to college expectations. Increased rigor due to better alignment of standards or more challenging coursework would better prepare students for postsecondary education.

Implications for developmental programs

Developmental students exhibit lack of confidence in their academic abilities due to identified deficits. Many students experience negative feelings upon learning that they will be required to enroll in developmental coursework. Academic counselors should communicate the benefits of developing a foundation prior to enrolling in college coursework. Because student learning styles vary significantly, developmental coordinators should consider allowing students to choose from a variety of delivery options to meet the diverse needs of students enrolling in developmental courses. In addition, counselors should assist students in gaining an understanding of their preferred learning styles and match students to professors whose instructional methodologies are aligned to the individual students’ needs. Finally, participants in this study identified college learning centers, math labs, and writing labs as beneficial resources when sufficient time and assistance was devoted to support individual students. To meet the needs of these students, colleges should ensure that learning centers are adequately staffed to provide the level of support that students need. Of course, financial considerations are frequently a problem for community colleges and universities when attempting to staff learning centers. Perhaps, extended learning centers could utilize student organizations or other volunteers to provide assistance. Developmental program
directors may even need to consider nontraditional solutions such as online tutorials that students could access from home.

**Future research**

This research study should be replicated with a larger sample size. Increasing the number of participants would provide a richer description of student experiences. In addition, conducting multiple interviews with each participant at various points throughout the semester would allow the collection of richer data about student experiences. This modified procedure would allow the researcher and the participant to develop stronger relationships and would allow the interviewer to assess student perceptions at different times during the semester. In addition, future researchers may want to examine the experiences of students who do not persist, in order to compare their experiences to the experiences of students who do persist.

With an increasing number of students requiring developmental courses enrolling in colleges and universities, remedial programs should routinely be evaluated for effectiveness. Specifically, by examining grade distributions, course drop rates, and matriculation into college-level courses, institutions will be able to meet the needs of students by providing the appropriate success initiatives. Additional research is needed to determine specific instructional practices that are most effective in identifying, improving, and eradicating obstacles that prevent students from making a seamless transition from high school into postsecondary education.
References


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Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Title of Research Study:
Perceptions of Students in Developmental Classes

Participant:

Date:

Place:

Description: The purpose of this study will be to describe the perceptions of students about the quality of developmental courses offered at community colleges. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be used by community colleges and developmental teachers to improve the quality of developmental programs.

Central Research Questions: How do student perceptions about their academic abilities change as a result of participation in developmental courses at community colleges?

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your experiences in developmental classes.

2. How did you feel when you learned that you would be required to complete developmental coursework?

3. What are some of the benefits that you perceive of participating in developmental courses?

4. How do you see developmental courses supporting your long-term educational goals?

5. Specifically what do your instructors do that helps you to meet your educational goals?

6. How have your perceptions about your academic abilities changed as a result of participation in developmental coursework?

7. What, if anything, do you dislike about taking developmental courses?

8. What, if anything, do you wish your school or developmental course instructor would do to better support you?
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