

**Developmental Reading, Achievement and Persistence  
of African American Community College Students**

by

**M. Eileen Morelli**

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DEVELOPMENTAL READING, ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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DEVELOPMENTAL READING, ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

M. Eileen Mc Allen Morelli

University of Pittsburgh, 1999

Adviser: Dr. Shirley A. Biggs

The purpose of this ex post facto study was to compare records (college transcripts) of African American community college subjects who participated in a developmental reading course and those who declined to participate to determine if participation in a reading course improved achievement and persistence.

Using the records of the cohort of entering subjects in Fall 1989 and Spring 1990, a search of the student record system for ethnicity and reading placement scores was conducted. The search produced 513 records. Two groups were formed based on participation ( $n = 295$ ), or non participation ( $n = 114$ ) in a developmental reading course. A third group was identified from the developmental reading group who took the reading course and failed or withdrew ( $n = 104$ ). Information from the records in the three groups was gathered and recorded for sex, age group, level of reading placement, overall QPA third semester QPA, and number of semesters in college.

Subject data were analyzed by a two-way analysis of variance to determine the relationship between reading level scores, QPA and persistence. The results of the study indicated that enrollment in a developmental reading course had a positive effect on overall QPA and third semester QPA for African American community college subjects. However, neither enrollment in a developmental reading course nor initial reading placement test level were

indicators of persistence as measured by number of semesters enrolled.

Although reading ability is positively related to QPA, it may be only one of several variables which have an effect on persistence. Persistence and QPA may involve a variety of factors, which need to be addressed by community colleges as a means to increase African American students' opportunities for achieving their goal. A comprehensive developmental education program appears to offer a variety of academic and non-academic support mechanisms that address the causes of attrition.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of Harvard University in 1636, there has been continuing debate concerning the value of developmental education (Roberts, 1986). Two-year and four-year colleges, universities, small private colleges, and long established, prestigious institutions of higher education have faced the dilemma of the inadequately prepared student. As early as 1828, the Yale Report called for an end to the admission of students with what they described as defective preparation (Roberts, 1986). In 1894, Wellesley College in Massachusetts offered the first specific developmental education courses for freshmen who were in need of increased general academic college preparation (Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb, 1983; Roberts, 1986). Thus historically, in the United States, the concept of developmental education and the under prepared student has existed since the 1600s.

The mission of the community college is to provide numerous learning opportunities and services for a variety of constituents through an open enrollment policy. In accordance with this policy, community colleges have accepted the developmental student who enters college with below college level skills. When institutions of higher education are confronted with declining enrollments and shrinking resources, the expenses involved in maintaining developmental programs are closely scrutinized. Community colleges are increasingly the institution designated by both the state government policy makers and the student to help remediate and develop basic skills. Steinberg (1996) reported that Florida legislators discovered early in 1996 that 69 percent of all first-time enrolled community college students needed at least one remedial reading course. The previous year, Lively (1995) reported that the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York voted to limit

admission to senior colleges if the students were in need of remedial help. Students needing such help could attend one of The City College of New York's six community colleges.

Educators who have worked with developmental programs have, over the last several years, attempted to address the issue of accountability raised by politicians, parents, faculty, and administrators of higher education. One way to address this issue is to examine data related to developmental reading course taking, achievement, as measured by quality point average (QPA), and persistence, as measured by length of time at the institution, to justify the expenditure of limited resources for a developmental population.

Educators such as Roueche, Baker, Snow (1997) and Boylan and Bonham (1992) have concluded that developmental programs have contributed to the improvement of QPA and persistence in colleges. But, Kulik, Kulik, and Shwalb (1983), in a meta-analysis of the results from 60 independent evaluations of remedial and developmental programs, found that developmental studies programs in community colleges had a less positive record on student achievement in the areas of QPA and persistence. Such programs raised examination scores by an average of only 0.09 points, and these programs had similarly small effects on persistence rates. The effects of developmental studies programs in community colleges were almost indistinguishable from the effects of conventional community college programs. For example, students who took a developmental English course made very small gains in their class examination scores when compared to students who completed a freshman English course at the same community college.

Funding sources continue to shrink and policy makers are demanding accountability. In some states such as New York, Virginia, and California, the community colleges have been named by legislators as the obvious choice for remedial work. However, the meta-analysis completed by Kulik, Kulik, and Shwalb (1983) and a review of over 60 evaluation reports by Boylan and Bonham

(1992) suggest that developmental programs in community colleges have not established enough empirical research to support data for long-term retention or student performance in regular college courses. Developmental studies courses and other courses at community colleges may be indistinguishable from each other in the amount or type of preparation that they provide for high-risk students.

Rice (1980), a developmental educator, has described the concept of developmental education as “suffering from the lovable and sloppy philosophy and psychology born of the 60s, where intention was more important than result, and where the means was an end in itself” (p. 9). With so much time and effort being focused on accountability these days, educators should focus on results, rather than the means being an end in itself.

Boylan (1994) posited that African American students did not succeed at the community college in the manner in which others might flourish. However, many times, it is the only available source of affordable higher education available to many students.

### Background of the Problem

This study is the result of a discussion of the staff at a large community college in the eastern part of the United States who has undertaken a project to examine the effectiveness of its developmental reading program. This two-year, public institution has an equal access philosophy that has resulted in an open enrollment admissions policy. Established in 1966, it offers academic and continuing education courses to enable students to transfer to four-year institutions or train them for employment.

The college under study is a multi-campus community college, consisting of one campus in each of the quadrants of the county that it serves. It is governed by the 16 members of the county

appointed Board of Trustees, four of whom are African American. Clark (1997) reports that two-thirds of the student population are over the age of 22, with an average age of 29. At the time of this study, females comprised 60% of the enrollment and males comprised 40%. African American students were 13.85% of the college enrollment. Three-quarters of the student body attend on a part-time basis.

During the period under study the student population at each campus varied by number of students, ethnicity, and foreign student representation. The urban campus of the community college enrolled the largest number of students and carried the largest enrollment in the developmental reading classes. Mason (1994) reported that 15% of all course registrations in the college were in developmental education classes. The urban campus offered 46% of these developmental classes, and the next largest campus, a suburban campus, offered 26%. The two suburban other campuses offered 15% and 13% respectively. There was no rural campus as part of this system.

Based on the past enrollment trends, and the projected enrollment for the next two years, 1998-2000 should see an increase in the population of all ethnic groups. This college's Equal Educational Opportunity (EEO) plan for 1998-2000 includes the goal of strengthening partnerships with the city and the county to improve educational opportunities. This is being accomplished by providing a smooth transition for high school students as they enter college and by developing or continuing programs which will help overcome barriers to equal access for minority students and faculty. Programs that will promote retention and the academic success of the African American male, increase student interest and scores in mathematics and science, and hire and mentor minority faculty will continue to serve the needs of the college minority population. Finally, some of the programs cited in the overall plan are being reshaped, new ones are being added, and others are being discontinued in order to better meet equal access objectives.

## Statement of the Problem

In the years following World War II, American citizens supported the notion that a college education greatly improved an individual's employment opportunities, lifelong income, and other factors that influenced the quality of an individual's life and well being. That notion continues today, and Roueche and Roueche (1993) have reported, "Jobs for the unskilled are disappearing in great numbers and will never return, and new jobs for the unskilled are dead-end and low-paying" (p. 13). According to the United States Census data (1993), the differences in earnings reflecting different levels of education have accelerated. Increasingly, a college education is of prime importance in the job market. In the year 2000, the Department of Labor (1996) estimates that 65% of jobs will require some college attendance, but less than a bachelor's degree.

The state in which the college under study is located is 49th among 50 states in the share of family income committed to in-state public tuition. In the 1995-1996 school year, this state's average in-state public college tuition was a high 14.64% of the average family income in the state [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1997]. In this study, the community college ranked the lowest in dollar cost, by almost \$2000, to the next college of any kind in the state for in-state, full-time tuition and fees.

Enrollment of African American students has increased from 10% to 14% over the past five years at the community college used for the study. Although minority student enrollment rates increased from 1993 to 1996, graduation rates for minority students have not increased (Clark, 1997).

Many students, including African American and other minority students, begin their initial college experience at the community college. According to Boylan (1993), however, only 10% of African American community college students had graduated or were still in school 3 ½ years after

initial enrollment. “Unless efforts are made to enhance the retention of the most poorly prepared minority students at community colleges, they may not be the best choice for promoting educational opportunity for students of color” (Boylan, 1993, p. 3).

It is the belief of most developmental educators that participation in developmental programs will enhance under prepared students’ basic skill levels and will enable them to obtain higher QPAs so that they remain in college through completion of requirements or graduation. Since this assumption has formed the foundation for the design and implementation of many developmental programs, it is important to have data to verify the accuracy of the assumption.

There were no data at the community college under study to document the effectiveness of developmental reading courses. Disagreement among the faculty contributed to the need for data. For example, the psychology faculty had commented that the developmental reading program cutoff scores were too high, making the criteria to enter directly into credit course work too high. They felt that some students were being unfairly placed in the reading course when they could have been succeeding at college level classes. Other faculty members had claimed that students who have completed the developmental program performed better in their classes than students with similar entrance scores who had not participated in the program.

Developmental faculty members were confident that students who participated in the program were doing better academically and were persisting longer than students with similar backgrounds who had not participated in the program. However, there was no empirical evidence to support any of these claims.

The purpose of this study was to compare sample records of the African American community college students who participated in a developmental reading course and those who declined to participate in the course. A comparison of achievement (QPA) and persistence (length of

time in college) between these sample records should inform both faculty and administrators about the relative benefits or lack thereof to African American students taking developmental reading course work at a community college. More specifically, the study examined whether the records of African American students who completed at least one developmental reading course have significantly different third semester and overall QPAs and persisted longer than the sample records of African American students who were required, but did not, take a developmental reading course.

### Research Questions

Are there differences in achievement (QPA), and persistence (length of time in college) between the records of African American community college students who took developmental reading courses and those who were required to, but did not? Following an ex post facto study of college transcripts these specific questions were answered:

- 1.a. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have an effect on QPA?
- 1.b. Does reading level, as determined by the Iowa Test of Silent Reading have an effect on QPA?
- 1.c. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have differential effects for subjects of two different reading levels (6 to 24 versus 25 to 34) in terms of QPA?
- 2.a. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have an effect on QPA after third semester?
- 2.b. Does reading level, as determined by the Iowa Test of Silent Reading have an effect on QPA after the third semester?
- 2.c. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have differential effects for subjects of two different reading levels (6 to 24 versus 25 to 34) in terms of QPA after the third semester?

3.a. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have an effect on number of semesters enrolled?

3.b. Does reading level, as determined by the Iowa Test of Silent Reading have an effect on number of semesters enrolled?

3.c. Does enrollment in a developmental reading course have differential effects for subjects at two reading levels (6 to 24 versus 25 to 34) in terms of semesters enrolled?

### Definition of Terms

Listed below are the operational definitions of key terms used to describe concepts which are presented throughout the study.

Academic achievement is measured by the quality point average (QPA).

Developmental reading courses are designed to have students learn and review general reading and vocabulary found in college level textbooks. Students testing between 6 and 24 on the Iowa Test of Silent Reading are required to take College Reading I. Students testing between 25-34 on the Iowa Test of Silent Reading are required to take Advanced College Reading.

Enrollment in course means that a student is required to take one of the designated developmental reading courses that the college offers for 3 hours a week for 15 weeks or a total of 45 contact hours.

F or W developmental reading course is a term used to describe students who enrolled in a college reading course and either failed or withdrew from the course.

No developmental reading course is a term used to describe students who received a score of 6-34 on the Iowa Test of Silent Reading and who were required to take college Reading I or Advanced College Reading and declined.

Open enrollment exists at colleges who admit all applicants to the college who apply if they are high school graduates and/or recipients of a general education diploma.

Persistence is the length of time a student stays in school to work toward a degree.

Placement is the process of assigning students to the best possible match between a student's current achievement status and various course sequences.

Program effectiveness is the degree to which a program is accomplishing its stated goals and objectives. In this study, it was determined by the difference in the QPA and persistence of the students who took a reading course and those who were required to take a reading course and chose not to.

Quality Point Average (QPA) is determined by calculating the total number of quality credits earned in courses and dividing by the total number of credits attempted. Grades earned in developmental courses are not calculated in QPAs.

### Significance of the Study

The importance or the significance of this study can be found in the information it provides to administrators of post secondary institutions and the faculty who teach undergraduate courses for students entering college with delayed reading skills. There is scant information in the literature specifically addressing the needs of the African American, community college, developmental reading student. This information can add to the body of evidence that can be instructive in making decisions for effective programming at the community college level of post secondary education for African American students.

### Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to the following limitations:

1. To the extent that each community college is unique, the results of the study may not apply to other community colleges.

2. The study includes only those students who matriculated in the academic years 1989-1990. The students enrolled during these years may not be representative of students matriculating in other years.

3. The success of the ex post facto research method used in this study depended on the selection of groups which were homogeneous with respect to certain critical variables. The data were presented as they were found, i.e., reading placement scores, QPA, and semesters of persistence in college.

4. Cutoff scores used with the placement test to assign reading course placement were determined in consultation with the test publishing company's recommendations. In addition to publisher recommendations, advice was received from the test and measurement center of a large research university. It should be noted that the cutoff scores used by the college were then adopted by the Developmental Reading Department of the college under study. This procedure is generally used to determine cutoff scores for developmental classes in colleges throughout the United States. While recommendations are made to the college or university for cutoff scores, it should be noted that each group still has the power to choose the final cutoff score using its own judgment. This causes inconsistency in the cutoff score level from one college or university to another.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

This review of the related literature presents the literature relevant to the academic success of African American students enrolled in developmental programs in community colleges. The review begins with general information about community college enrollment and then continues with a profile of community college students. This is followed by literature relevant to the need for developmental programs, accountability, and the evaluation of developmental education. Then the literature presented focuses on developmental education among African Americans and their achievement and persistence in college, with special emphasis on the community college. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature presented.

#### A Profile of Community College Students

Hodgkinson (1985) noted that, of the 12 million college students in the United States, only about two million are full-time students, who live on campus and are between the ages of 18 to 22. The majority of college freshmen are enrolled in two-year commuter institutions, with more than six million attending only part-time.

Community college students have a different profile than their four-year counterparts. They are more likely to commute and attend part-time since circumstances force them to combine school with work and family responsibilities. They are also generally older, clustering in the 21-to 24-year range. Many read between the eighth and ninth grade level, which indicates that they are often less academically prepared than their university counterparts (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1994). Community college students exhibit complex enrollment patterns, making monitoring difficult. Students who graduate often “stop-out” for extended periods and return to continue their pursuit of an associate’s degree (Dillon, 1990). In addition, while liberal arts colleges and universities have

maintained specific entrance standards, community colleges support an open door policy. Community colleges provide for students who are from the lower two-thirds of the academic spectrum. For example, under the 1975 Master Plan of Higher Education in California, university enrollment was limited to students in the upper eighth of their high school graduating class while state college enrollment was limited to the upper third. The only avenue of public higher education for the remaining two-thirds of the high school graduates of California was the community college (Roueche & Snow, 1977).

### The Need for Developmental Programs

With a strong commitment to making higher education accessible to all who could benefit, while maintaining academic quality and standards, higher education has recognized the increasing need for developmental programs. Roueche and Snow (1977) found an increasing number of institutions offering developmental programs. Specifically, they found that 93% of the two-year colleges and 78% of four-year colleges surveyed had developmental programs. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1985), in a 1983-1984 survey, reported that 82% of all institutions and 94% of public institutions offered at least one developmental course. In the 1995 report from the NCES, it was again reported that more than three-quarters of America's colleges offer remedial courses. Over 80% of all colleges and universities offer programs for the developmental student (Boylan, Bonham & Bliss, 1994; Wright & Cahalan, 1985) as compared to only nine percent in 1960 (Enright, 1988). Currently, developmental courses enroll more community college students than do any other courses (Boylan et al., 1994; Roberts, 1986). In 1995, NCES reported that remedial courses were especially common at two-year institutions. Almost all public two-year colleges reported that they provided at least one remedial course in math, in reading, and in writing.

In response to the needs of these students, developmental education emerged to combine the personnel and activities of academic affairs with student affairs to support student learning (Clowes, 1980). The academic/student affairs personnel model used for developmental education attempts to combine the student support and academic functions of a collegiate institution to assist with student success within the post-secondary environment.

A successful program must serve the student's cognitive and affective needs. The research of McGrath and Spear (1987), Marcotte (1986), and Roueche, Baker, and Roueche (1985) supports the effectiveness of developmental education programs at the post-secondary level, which include teaching and student support components. McGrath and Spear (1987) discuss the politics of remediation that is reflected in the struggle by community colleges to develop a distinctive identity. They posit if nontraditional students are to be adequately prepared for academic success, then there must be a substantial transformation in their conceptions of education and in their sense of themselves as learners.

Roueche, Baker, and Roueche (1985) discuss the components of successful programs. Their expanded research efforts provided 11 elements that were common to all programs meeting general retention criterion. The 11 elements common to general retention criterion were: strong administrative support; mandatory assessment and placement structured courses; award credit for classes, flexible completion strategies; multiple learning systems; instructors who volunteer for the teaching assignment; peer tutors; monitor student behavior; interface basic skills courses with regular, subsequent courses; and conduct evaluations of effectiveness.

Boylan (1983) indicates that programs which show the greatest gain in test scores and quality point average (QPA), as well as improvement in retention of students, tend to be comprehensive in scope and services. Studies by Bean (1981), Ryland, Riordan, and Brack (1994), and Tinto (1993)