

Charles M. Cook, Ed.D.
Vice Chancellor for Instruction
Houston Community College
3100 Main Street
Houston, TX 77002

ph: 713-718-5040
charles.cook@hccs.edu

Materials submitted to SHEC staff on June 19, 2010.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to comment on developmental education at Houston Community College (HCC). In my remarks, I'd like to tell you a little about (1) HCC and our students in general; (2) HCC students in developmental education; (3) promising practices we've implemented; and (4) the benefits of developmental education for the state and how it might be improved.

1. HCC is a very large and diverse district with six colleges covering the central city and the close suburbs on the northeast, west, and southwest parts of Houston. This semester we enrolled over 72,000 students with 81 percent taking credit courses toward certificates and/or associate degrees.

Our students are 26.7 percent African-American, 9.7 percent Asian, 18.5 percent Caucasian, and 28.8 percent Hispanic. Additionally, HCC has over 6,600 international students, the largest such enrollment in any community college in the United States.

Our students' average age is over 26. Many of them dropped out of high school and later earned a GED, many of them went into the work force right out of high school, only to learn that they had insufficient knowledge and skills to get and hold a good-paying job, and some of them already have degrees, but decided to return to school to upgrade their skills and continue their education.

Many of our students are the first in their family to attend college and have neither parents nor older siblings to help guide the way. A large and growing number of our students depend upon financial aid and attend HCC part-time, often while working many hours and taking care of families of their own.

2. Of the approximate 10,000 new students who enroll in HCC for the first time each Fall semester, about 22 percent will need some remediation in writing, 19 percent will need some remediation in reading, and almost 60 percent will need some remediation in math.

Many of the students who place into developmental education (about half or more) will do well and move forward. However, some of the students (about one-third) are at such low levels of achievement that they need major assistance that will take significant time. And the more time it takes - the less likely it is that they will persist or succeed.

Many of them really belong in other programs instead of developmental education, such as Adult Basic Education, GED, lower levels of ESL, and/or classes for students with learning disabilities. Unfortunately, students often opt for developmental education instead because such a route affords them the opportunity for federal financial aid whereas the others do not. Perhaps Texas needs to consider a more precise floor for developmental education, with better diagnostic assessment of students' needs up front, and greater support for alternative paths to education and training thereafter.

3. In 2004, HCC was one of 27 colleges across the nation funded by the Lumina Foundation in an excellent initiative entitled Achieving the Dream (ATD) with the intent of improving academic success for students, particularly students of color and students of low income. Our success with ATD has led to further grants from the Gates Foundation, MDRC, the Houston Endowment, and the Carnegie Foundation.

During ATD, we instituted two major strategies that have had excellent results: Freshman Success Courses (FSC) and Learning Communities. The vast majority of our students were entering HCC without a clear understanding of the expectations of college or even the opportunities for career advancement that it could offer them. For these students, we created a required first semester course entitled College and Career Exploration.

The course introduces students to college programs and services and emphasizes the kinds of self-efficacy skills they must develop *regardless* of their career choice - skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, time and stress management, teamwork, and decision making. Further, the course requires that they participate in career exploration activities and choose a major and file a degree plan by the end of the semester. Over time, the students who begin HCC with this course have a 20 percent or greater persistence rate after two years than those who did not.

The second major strategy is the implementation of Learning Communities, the combining of two courses in which students co-enroll and in which the faculty collaborate in the selection of a common theme, common learning activities, and

provision of additional support. We typically pair a developmental education course with a college credit course. The learning communities help provide students with greater academic and social engagement, the major factors that research has indicated are significant in maintaining student persistence. Much like the FSC, learning communities have resulted in significantly higher rates of student persistence, especially for African-American and Hispanic students.

Locally, HCC has developed very promising relationships with our public school partners. We have over 7,000 students enrolled in dual credit courses, summer bridge programs, and in six Early College High Schools (ECHS) located on our campuses. At the original one - Challenge ECHS - selected recently by the US News and World Reports as one of the best in the nation - the students are out-performing our regular college students and graduating from HS with an average of 48 semester credit hours (SCH) of college credit.

I think the current use of testing in Texas does not serve the state well. For students in the 9th and 10th grades, we should utilize *diagnostic* instruments - such as ACT's COMPASS - rather than content-based tests - so that a determination and prescription might be made early as to the status of their reading, writing, and math skills. When this happens - as in our ECHS - it allows us to work with students while they're still in high school and to ensure that they come to us prepared and ready for college-level work.

4. Developmental education is a necessary expense for the state of Texas. For many students, this is the first time they are receiving such education, having dropped out of high schools or having never really received it in the first place. If we don't provide this education and opportunity for students, their alternatives are likely dead-end jobs, criminal activity, or dependence on welfare. It's much better to educate people to their fullest potential, enable them to advance in the workplace, and earn sufficient funds to support families and pay taxes as contributing members of society.

Developmental education in Texas could definitely be improved. To reiterate, my two major recommendations would be to provide support for: (a) improved diagnostic testing of students' skills to determine and attend to their needs as early as possible; and (b) innovative programs and services in the community colleges that have data to document their success, as our FSC and learning communities programs do.