Chapter 3

The Price of Completion at Any Cost

In April 2012, the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success released a report revealing that the United States was still losing ground internationally in postsecondary credential attainment. Report authors Prince and Choitz, however, predicted that if national completion goals could be achieved by 2025, extraordinary economic returns would be realized, to the tune of $67 billion generated that year in federal revenue and $64 billion in state revenue, far exceeding the estimated $9.8 billion in federal and the $21 billion in state investment in postsecondary education.¹ Gaudy financial returns like these grab the attention of those looking to stimulate economic growth and permanently put the worst recession in modern history behind them, and so postsecondary enrollment and completion remains a high national priority for the political and other leaders held most responsible for America’s economic health.

After Pima’s new admission standard went into effect, Fall 2012 enrollment of full-time students in developmental education coursework went down 30 percent from the previous fall, compared with only a 10 percent downturn in the general student population over the same time period. Pima also reportedly experienced “a dip of 28 percent for faculty members who teach remedial courses,”² in line with the developmental education enrollment drop. Intuitively, to many, a policy that would limit enrollment in any way is at direct odds with increasing postsecondary completion. For that reason and others, legislators and policymakers, clamoring the most for the award of more postsecondary credentials, continue to push open access at the nation’s community colleges as central to success in every postsecondary completion plan.

Instead of mourning the 30 percent enrollment drop of the lowest-skilled students in developmental education at Pima, however, it should have been celebrated that students unable to demonstrate possession of basic skills equivalent to the seventh grade were not given access to the Federal Student Aid (FSA)-eligible curriculum, but provided instead with a host of resources and alternatives to help them prepare for future admission or for other kinds of postsecondary success without sacrificing their financial aid eligibility in

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the long term. It is true that some community college students are misplaced into developmental education by overreliance on one high-stakes placement test. It is also true that some students in developmental education can succeed in college-level courses with integrated basic skills instruction and other kinds of supplemental support. It is no less true that others, however, would benefit more from a dedicated, contextualized developmental education experience before being allowed into college-level courses. And it is exceedingly true that still others with extremely low skills are inappropriately placed in developmental education courses on a college-degree path when they would be better served in other postsecondary settings with different approaches and sometimes even different end goals. Instead, two approaches favored by those strategizing to reach national completion goals are to accelerate low-skilled students into college-level courses—even with embedded support—and to employ performance funding, both dangerous directions for American higher education. Taken together, these practices will lower academic standards, artificially plump completion, and in many ways drive our country closer to becoming a historical also-ran.

Casting Developmental Education as an Impediment

The field of developmental education has been relentlessly and unjustifiably disparaged in recent times, and sometimes by those lacking the critical exposure to and experience with developmental education to make well-informed judgments. Policy group, Complete College America (CCA), for example, contributed the sensationalistic report titles Time Is the Enemy and Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere, the latter of which described developmental education on the front cover as a “broken system.” MDRC released a 2011 report on developmental education entitled Unlocking the Gate. Senator Beth Bye from Connecticut likened developmental education to a “brick wall.” Bill Gates’ opinion? “Take remedial math, which is an absolute disaster. What destroys more self-confidence than any other educational thing in America is being assigned to some remedial math when you get into college, and then it’s not taught very well.” The AACC’s own 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges—with one token community college professor in the group of 39 contributors, most whom were either current CEO-level community college administrators, completion advocates, or four-year researchers or policy experts—described developmental education as “dysfunctional” and “all too often a burial ground for student aspirations.” Such polarizing language fails to capture the whole truth and, therefore, ultimately leads us away from effective solutions.

Some of the most sage, yet widely disregarded, advice to completion advocates redesigning twenty-first-century developmental education comes from Dr. Hunter Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education. In the early pages of What Works: Research-Based Practices in Developmental Education, considered the unofficial developmental education bible by practitioners in the field, Boylan imparted in a section devoted