

# AT ISSUE

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## *Moving from At Risk to At Promise*

*A Paradigm Shift for Community Colleges  
Addressing Underprepared Students*

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*A special thanks to  
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### **Introduction**

Perception and semantics play an important role in the success or failure of students who are under-prepared for higher education. Among community colleges nationwide, the challenges of open-entry have moved from preparing students for transfer education and careers in emerging industries to addressing remedial needs in basic academic areas and study skills. Yet the term "at risk," a commonly used phrase describing students with educational needs below college level, may undermine the success of these students by implying that they are starting from a deficit point of overcoming obstacles. Instead of creating an empowering environment that promotes students' potential, the label "at risk" perpetuates the belief that these students are damaged and personally flawed where "psychological character, physiological makeup, and cultural patterns of students are called into question and labeled deficient..." (Franklin, 2000, p.3).

*In challenging the status quo, the authors prefer to develop a new way of knowing and viewing our roles, by seeing community colleges as places where all students at promise are resources to be cultivated, not problems to be solved.*



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"I think support for a student is a big part of success. Faculty can help with that. A career that interests you is important; you've got to like what you're studying."

~ Doreen Timmers, student, Grand Rapids Community College



Proposing a new paradigm to deconstruct the "at-risk" label, this article asks community college leaders to re-frame the challenge by setting a tone of empowerment and inclusiveness and to begin creating an organizational culture that internalizes the construct of students "at promise." This shift in terminology encourages community colleges to become learning organizations where the belief in students' promise is a shared philosophy, altering the discourse "from a discussion of 'them' or 'the other' to a discussion of 'us'" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Swadener & Niles, 1991; Polakow, 1993).

The demand for accountability, in terms of assessment, measurement, and data gathering, has led

community colleges to create programs and strategies and to develop models that call for systemic and comprehensive reform. These changes alone, however, may not be sufficient to address the increasing numbers of under-prepared students whose communities will need their talents and skills in the 21st century. Studies show that approximately 60% of community college students "must take at least one developmental education course before they can enroll in college-level courses" (Collins, 2009, p. 5; Collins, 2010). Some institutions have seen up to 98% of new incoming students place into at least one developmental education course, with 38% of new incoming students needing remediation in all three developmental education courses, as well (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009). More fundamental is the need for a "common vision" that calls for a shift in "how students are to be viewed within the academic arena" (Boykin, 2009).

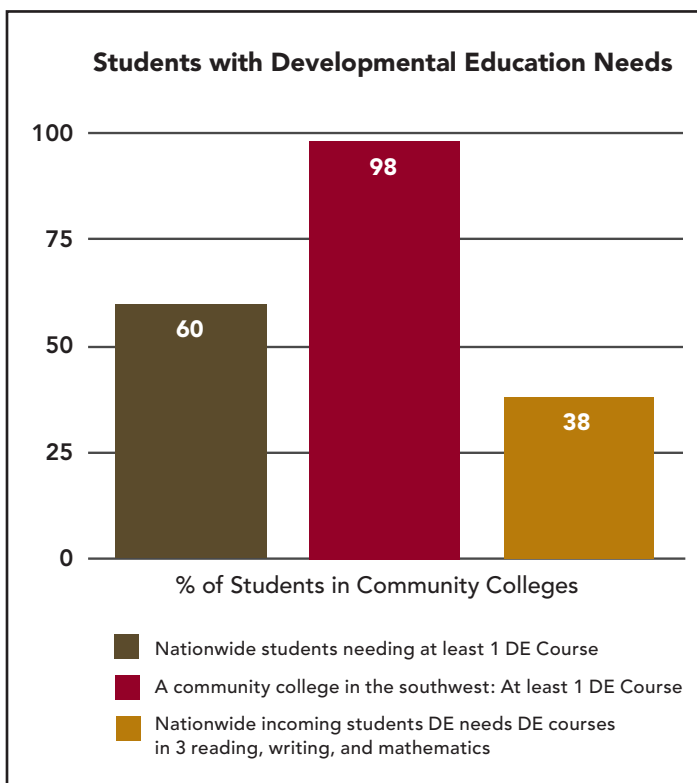
In challenging the status quo, the authors prefer to develop a new way of knowing and viewing our roles by seeing community colleges as places where all students "at promise" are resources to be cultivated, not problems to be solved. If we are to be student-centered, we need to view at-risk students as having strength, resilience, and social capital. As Tierney stressed, "Programs that see individuals as broken and in need of repair are less likely to create the conditions for success than those programs that assume students are a valuable resource to themselves, their families, communities, and society" (Tierney, 1997).

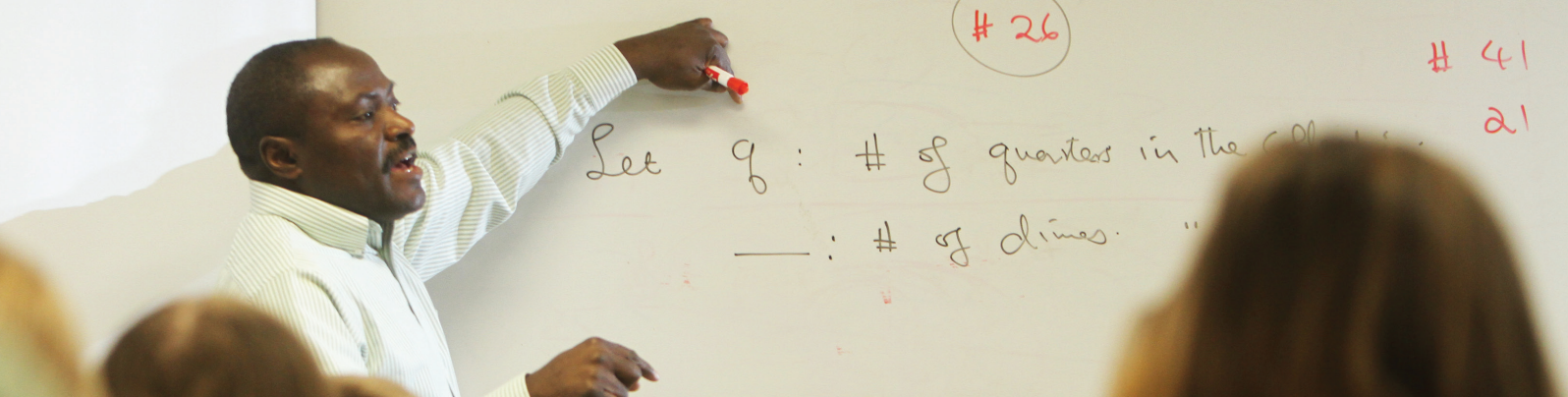
## Organizational Divide

One of the primary challenges confronting community colleges when developing strategies for increased student graduation rates is "improving the success of students in their developmental, or remedial, education programs" (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). As remedial programs become essential components of community college curricula, institutions find themselves divided in terms of how to approach developmental educational programs, especially for at-promise students.

Several community colleges are asking: should

**Figure 1: Percentage of students with developmental education needs, nationally. Data sources: Collins, 2009, p. 5; Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009.**





the focus of a college be directed toward liberal arts, vocational programs, and transferability, or should there be a stronger emphasis on developmental systems that allow students who require additional courses to be successful? The open-door mission has long been a cornerstone within the community college mission. Proponents of developmental education initiatives argue that it is the task of community colleges to provide educational and social support to those students who attend these institutions as a gateway into higher education (Myran, 2009).

Developmental initiatives come at a cost. Institutions are continuously increasing budget allocations for remedial programs. Nationally, some cost estimates for these programs range from \$1 billion annually to three to four times that amount (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Institutional budgets are getting stretched to the limit, and many are being reduced dramatically. In particular, developmental education programs face financial scrutiny (Whissemore, 2010). Other non-financial costs include additional time, energy, and effort by students pursuing certificates and degrees. This impact has far-reaching effects going beyond the boundaries of the campus.

The organizational divide needs to be addressed and properly handled for the betterment of the institution and its constituents. The use of cross-campus collaboration and the creation of formalized networks will allow institutions to develop a set of guiding principles, and then apply these to all forms of educational approaches to help build a harmonious learning environment (Pusser

& Levin, 2009). Creating a social ecosystem, in which all stakeholders would have equal influence on the approaches used to complete the college's mission, could have a sizable effect in closing any organization divide that may have existed within the institution (Mitleton-Kelley, n.d.). No matter what the approach, the overarching goal is to create a strategic balance within the organization that allows for growth and success at every level of student's educational career.

## The Student's Perspective

The college experience is a significant factor in the development of personal identity and creates impact far beyond the student, influencing the lives of those within their family (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). A strong correlation exists between academic self-concept (cognitive and affective beliefs and judgments about one's academic prowess) and achievement. How students perceive their strengths and weaknesses can create conditions for success or failure (Cokley, Komarraju, King, Cunningham, & Muhammad, 2003). Students look to institutions for indications of their potential and capabilities.

An institutional shift in redefining students from "at risk" to "at promise" is the first step in creating an academic self-concept in which students perceive their strengths, rather than focusing only on their weaknesses, as their academic foundation. At the same time, the process of academic conditioning is addressed. Rather than building academic self-concept through false flattery, however, the student becomes aware of the work needed in conjunction with their own talents, including the skills needed to achieve their goals. Thus, the student begins to view the academic undertaking as a promising endeavor or rather than one fraught with risks.

Students who enter college with a strong knowledge of post-secondary expectations are more likely to develop a positive academic self-concept. However, many students identified as "at risk" face a number of additional challenges upon entering college that negatively affect the development of their academic self-concept, thus making it difficult for them to be successful. These

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students disproportionately come from low-income families, are first-generation college students, or come from an ethnic or racial minority background and may have experienced lower levels of academic preparedness. Because they are less likely to receive financial support from their families and are more likely to have work and family obligations outside of school, their ability to participate fully in college experiences may be limited. Research suggests that at-risk students are less likely to participate in academic and social activities that lead to college success, such as study groups and extracurricular activities (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Shifting from “at risk” to “at promise” requires more than just re-labeling. It requires successfully integrating students into the college environment as part of the academic conditioning process by explaining expectations, policies, procedures, and available services. Students who are armed with knowledge of the institution and expectations will have a stronger foundation on which to build a positive self-concept.

## A Practical Approach

As leaders and advocates of our communities and colleges, it is imperative that we take a stand for students, access, and student success. We can begin by shifting the paradigm from “at risk” to “at promise” and embrace the philosophy that every student has the chance to succeed. We can recognize, evaluate, and implement best practices and show our community that we value action rather than just words; change the culture by focusing on what is needed for student completion and success; and, finally, help increase students’ social capital. According to Burns (2010) “high levels of social capital” obtained through accessing “student support services such as advising and tutoring” will assist students in approaching faculty and staff for assistance. Furthermore “access to strong social networks such as family or friends who are familiar with higher education can provide assistance in identifying potential support within a college” (Burns, 2010, p. 37).

In addition to changing the philosophy and ensuring that every employee at the college is in tune with

“Make sure you see your counselors and talk to them when problems start. Ask questions when you don’t understand something. No question is dumb. It’s not asking questions that is dumb. You are paying for this. Get all you can and utilize all that’s available to you.”

~ Kim Reis, student, Grand Rapids Community College

the mission of success for all students, many community colleges have engaged in several promising practices that promote student success for many at-promise students. A few such engagements that have worked are included here. In addition, a recent study by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) led by Kay McClenney shares comparative data from four quantitative surveys, along with numerous interviews and focus groups in order to identify some inconsistencies between various audience perspectives and institutional policies. The best practices identified in that report are consistent with many of those mentioned here.

## Getting students off to the right start

- 1) Use multiple assessments:** Using multiple assessment tools, such as diagnostic features for cognitive testing, can yield better placement of incoming students, especially those who will place within developmental education courses (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Hughes and Scott-Clayton suggest that instead of traditional testing, colleges consider multiple testing assessments, taking into account high school preparation and student choice (2011). In addition, using affective testing measures can yield information on student attitudes and behaviors that can have an impact on student success. An affective measure of psycho-social behavior could be used to measure the trait of perseverance (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). When paired with cognitive testing, an affective measure can be a strong predictive element in assessing the needs of students.
- 2) Eliminate late registration:** A significant relationship has been seen between the time of registration and student persistence. According to Smith, Street, and



Olivarez (2002), "late registrants were much less likely to persist to the next semester than early or regular registrants and were more likely to withdraw from courses." In addition, a connection was also found between returning students' GPAs and course completion based on the time of registration (Smith, et al., 2002).

### 3) Mandate enrollment into developmental courses:

Studies have shown greater attrition among students who placed into developmental courses and took college-level courses before developmental courses. This reinforces the concept of mandatory placement into developmental courses for those students who score below acceptable benchmarks. Sequential placement into developmental courses could increase student success, persistence, and retention (Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2010). Reading, a foundational necessity both in completing academics as well as finding success in the workforce, is a strong predictor of academic success and learning (Kern & Friedman, 2008; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004).

### 4) Create a college & life success course: Several

colleges have shown increased levels of success, persistence, and retention among students who participated in a student success course compared to those who did not. At Miami-Dade College, for example, the minority student graduation rate doubled after mandating that students who placed within developmental education take a student success course (Gonzalez, 2012). This type of course identifies key traits to be developed for success, thus aligning the cognitive with the psycho-social needs that lead to student success. The course also integrates many concepts of a first-year experience course tailored to the at-promise student.

## Accelerating and Mainstreaming

5) Shorten the pipeline: Implementing "shorter academic terms, less time off between terms, year-round scheduling" and credits for competencies, rather than credits for seat time can improve retention and persistence (Schneider & Yin, 2011, p. 14). Using the concept of competency-based course progression, courses in the developmental academic subjects could be offered in accelerated and open entry/open

## Steps to move students from "At Risk" to "At Promise"







exit (OE/OE) modular student-paced course design. Accelerated formats could also be used to compress typical developmental education curriculum into seven or eight weeks, or through pairing courses such as reading and writing, which have been shown to help some students move ahead with their progress (Edgecomb, 2011).

**6) Create and use cohorts:** Student engagement and creation of learning communities has been shown to improve persistence and success (Woiwood, 2002; Rendón, 2002; Tinto, 2006b). Furthermore, the use of cohort classes/programs can increase graduation rates, as seen at Lake Area Technical Institute (Gonzalez, 2012). Using a cohort progression and restricting student choice ultimately led to two-thirds of students graduating in under three years and 90% of these students finding employment (Gonzalez, 2012).

**7) Making the cultural shift:** Being true to the open-access mission of a student-centered institution, community colleges have begun addressing the cultural mindset needed to make the change from “at risk” to “at promise.” In a recent discussion with community college leaders, Lorenzo shares that Milliron and others recommend a more holistic approach to addressing the overarching completion agenda by addressing the “lost momentum framework” (Lorenzo, 2011, p. 16). Realizing that retention, engagement, and developmental education needs are all interconnected, we must begin to re-frame the challenge of increasing persistence and degree completion or transfer success by developmental students in a more positive, balanced, and systematic way.

## Conclusion: Bringing it all together

The paradigm shift from “at risk” to “at promise” is more than a proposal for semantic change. Empty praise is ineffective in changing student success rates if left to simply boosting confidence alone (Loveless, 2006) without addressing the context of improving persistence and guidance needed for student success. Instead, this

shift must be accompanied by a combination of efforts that adopt and adapt practical approaches, such as using cognitive and affective testing effectively, removing late registration, addressing course design and delivery, creating opportunities for cohort and peer support, and building a culture of change in the shared mission of student success at all levels of the institution. All of these efforts together are just some ways we can begin to support at-promise students who may still struggle to achieve their desired success.

In keeping with the historic open-door missions of community colleges, our institutions strive to support the realization of democratic ideals to raise the quality of education for all individuals and secure a prosperous future for all Americans. To do this, higher education must address the equity issue (Tinto, 2006a) and the dualistic thinking of “us and them” (Chickering, 2009) that prevents under-prepared students from reaching their full potential as productive contributing members of society. This paradigm shift addresses how we define institutional effectiveness creating solutions that are within our reach while demonstrating our social responsibility.

We challenge community colleges leaders to make the bold changes necessary to re-frame and re-shape how we interact with students by creating institutional policies, practices, and programs that reflect a student-centered mission where the language of “at risk” is replaced by the new paradigm of “at promise.”

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"The thing I think that has contributed most to my success was taking the College Life Skills class and learning how I learn best so that I can implement that in my studies."

~ Holly Reil, student,  
Grand Rapids Community College

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(continued)

"The best advice that I could give is to not give up on yourself and to utilize the tutors and the writing and math labs. Meet with an academic counselor regularly to keep yourself on track. And the biggest thing, STUDY in chunks rather than cramming the hours before class."

~ Holly Reil, student, Grand Rapids Community College

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