

A Learning Agenda to Support the Strengthening and Implementation of the Core Principles for Transforming Developmental Education

*Prepared by the Community College Research Center in consultation with the
signatories of the Core Principles. Updated November 13, 2015.*

The Principles call for a broad and ambitious reform agenda for developmental education based on experience and evidence that the field has amassed thus far. As colleges have implemented reforms articulated in the Principles, they have been confronted with a variety of questions on three interrelated issues. First, what are the most effective models and approaches for putting the Principles into practice? Second, as the Principles are implemented more broadly across colleges and states, what can we continue to learn about the quality of implementation and about how effective they are for particular groups of students? And third, what are the most effective approaches to integrating these reforms into a “comprehensive student success strategy” (as stated in the subtitle of the Principles document) that strengthens the entire student pathway? Below we identify nine research questions that can help address the issues which have confronted colleges that have already begun to implement this broad and ambitious reform agenda.

1) What are the most effective strategies for helping students choose an academic and career direction and for determining the type and level of academic skill-building and support they need to succeed on that pathway (for example, whether they should be placed in college-level courses or in a co-requisite remedial model, or in other developmental education options)? (Principle 1)

The Principles reflect a broad conviction that currently typical assessment, placement, and course-choosing processes need to be replaced by a redesigned intake process that includes effective approaches to helping students explore options for college and careers, determining what cognitive and non-cognitive skills students will need to be successful in their field of interest, and assisting them to choose and enter college-level programs of study. Thus colleges need to develop a wholly new intake system, and the research needs to provide them with practical guidance on effective ways to do that.

2) What is the most effective strategy for integrating developmental education with college-level programs of study? (All of the Principles)

Several models are evolving across the field: New Math Pathways and Statway have created three broad types of developmental math pathways based on

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students' academic goals; some occupational programs embed basic skills instruction in substantive material; and colleges with meta-majors are beginning to consider customizing developmental education for different meta-majors. Which models are most effective, under what conditions, and for which students?

3) How can we best support students with very weak academic skills—those who might not be successful in a co-requisite program? (Principle 4)

The majority of students will likely benefit from enrollment in college-level courses with additional assistance. Are there students who are not adequately prepared to be successful in college-level courses even with additional assistance? What strategies are most effective in strengthening the skills of such students, without reproducing the disconnected traditional system of remediation? There is some positive evidence for CUNY Start and other accelerated models. Are there other promising models? Many colleges are using emporium models. Are they effective for these students?

4) How can we support success for the increasingly heterogeneous types of students in introductory college-level courses that are key to students' progress in their programs of study (for example, in courses such as introductory biology, psychology, history, economics, and anatomy and physiology, in addition to college-level English and math)? (Principles 3, 4, and 5)

Implementation of the Principles will lead to growing heterogeneity of students in introductory college courses. As it is, nearly half of community college students fail to meet academic progress requirements in their first semester; even among those deemed "college-ready," many struggle in introductory courses that are critical to success in their major. Introductory courses such as Biology 101 often have failure rates as high or higher than English or Math 101. Moreover, as more students are allowed to enroll directly into college-level courses, classes will become more heterogeneous and perhaps more difficult to teach. Thus the reform of developmental education will require improvements in strategies for teaching introductory college-level courses so that they can be effective both for students who previously were assigned to developmental education courses and those previously classified as college-ready.

5) What are the most effective approaches to strengthening students' non-cognitive/meta-cognitive skills? (Principles 3, 4 and 5)

Traditional remediation is designed to address academic weaknesses in math and English, yet non-cognitive/metacognitive skill weaknesses may be more serious barriers to student success. For example, students with strong metacognitive skills have tools that are helpful in addressing academic weaknesses. But remediation reform has paid little attention to improving these crucial skills.

6) What are the best strategies to improve the transition from high school to college with the goal of strengthening the preparation of entering students and reducing the need for any form of developmental education?

There are a variety of models designed to strengthen the academic and non-cognitive skills of entering college students. These include programs such as the Tennessee SAILS program and early college and transition course models. Which ones of these (or others) are most effective for which students?

7) How do students experience alternative approaches to developmental education? What types of activities do they report engaging in, and how do they feel about those activities? (All of the Principles)

Official policy and organizational and pedagogic design may not actually reach the classroom level; thus there may be a large gap between what colleges “provide” and what the student experiences. Talking to students and otherwise collecting information from them will be important to understanding how students are experiencing reforms and how to correct gaps between policy and experience. This can also help us understand whether students are making informed or uninformed decisions, which is particularly important for Principle 1.

8) What are the costs and return on investment for the policies and practices needed to implement the reforms inspired by the Principles?

The interventions necessary to implement the principles span a range of cost (from almost no cost to very expensive) and it will be important for institutional leaders, policy makers, and funders to understand cost implications as well as the return that could be gained from each in terms of student success.

9) How should institutions, systems, and state agencies change their organizational structures, processes, and roles of personnel in order to effectively implement the reforms reflected in these Principles? What professional development opportunities must be provided for faculty, advisors, and others working with students? What types of leadership strategies can help catalyze and manage these changes? (All of the Principles)

Taken together, the Principles require changes not only to academic support processes but also to intake systems, non-academic support structures, curricular structures, and instructional approaches. They also require supportive funding, legislation/regulation, and guidance at the system and state levels. Such comprehensive reform is unlikely to be successful without broader reforms in these political and organizational processes.