

right *from the*

# START

AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON  
DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION REFORM

**Adopting and Adapting Contextualization Strategies**  
*A Practitioner Brief*



**Acknowledgements**

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### **About Achieving the Dream**

Achieving the Dream, Inc. is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Evidence-based, student-centered, and built on the values of equity and excellence, Achieving the Dream is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by 1) guiding evidence-based institutional improvement, 2) leading policy change, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public. Conceived as an initiative in 2004 by Lumina Foundation and seven founding partner organizations, today, Achieving the Dream is leading the most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for student success in higher education history. With over 200 colleges, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 15 state policy teams—working throughout 34 states and the District of Columbia—the Achieving the Dream National Reform Network helps 3.8 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.



### **About MDC**

MDC, a nonprofit with an extensive history working to improve the effectiveness of community colleges around the nation, was established in 1967 and manages programs across the U.S. that connect education, employment, and economic security to help people “learn, earn, and save” their way to a place in the middle class. MDC’s strategies, aimed at removing the barriers that separate people from opportunity, include: using data to define gaps and mobilize leaders to create a will for change; demonstrating sustainable solutions and developing them into effective models; and then incubating them so they can be replicated at scale for maximum impact.

# Right from the Start: ATD and MDC's Approach

Broad access to quality education and training is essential to a robust economy, and an engaged society. With affordable tuition and campuses in big cities and small towns, community colleges make that education and training accessible to thousands of citizens every year. We developed the *Right from the Start* series of practitioner-focused, evidence-based briefs to highlight strategies that support the significant number of students who arrive on campus underprepared for credit-bearing coursework. Serving these students, who often undertake adult basic education and developmental education courses, is an important part of the community college dual mission of access and success.



## What Colleges Can Do

Developmental education shines a light on broader issues of access, success, and equity. Colleges can improve equitable outcomes by addressing several underlying issues:

**1) Understand the diversity of developmental education students.**

Colleges need to carefully consider the varied experience of underprepared students when assessing the support those students need to succeed in credit-bearing courses. It may be necessary to have multiple developmental education strategies that are tailored to different student groups.

**2) Emphasize teaching and learning.** Focusing attention on teaching and learning is a critical thread in all of the successful developmental education reforms featured in this series. That means colleges address academic content and structures as well as non-academic topics, such as navigating college culture and student self-efficacy.

**3) Build whole-college solutions.** Lasting, scaled change is most likely when efforts engage a broad range of college practitioners in examining student outcomes, designing the change process, mastering the skills required to implement new approaches, and refining these efforts over time.

It is our hope that these briefs will spark new ideas for practitioners who are committed to helping their students succeed – *right from the start.* —————>

## Adopting and Adapting Contextualization Strategies

*As described in this brief, Tacoma Community College and South Texas College each focused on contextualization as a cornerstone of developmental education reform, albeit with different approaches. With a comprehensive look at the experience at Tacoma Community College and a supplementary example from South Texas College, we begin to understand how colleges can enact effective reforms in developmental education that are uniquely appropriate to their institutions.*

### *Tacoma Community College*

Tacoma Community College (TCC) in Tacoma, Washington, has an annual enrollment of almost 15,000, with 56 percent full-time students. Located at the base of Puget Sound in the Seattle metro-area, TCC offers 46 professional/technical programs and many areas of study for college transfer students. The three driving concepts of TCC's current strategic plan—which are posted on signs and banners all over the campus—are as follows: create learning, achieve equity, engage community. In 2011, TCC was selected as a Leader College within the Achieving the Dream network, an acknowledgement of its commitment to and success in improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps.

In 2010, 42 percent of TCC's students tested into developmental English, and only 56 percent of those students completed developmental English and reading within two years. To improve the rates of students successfully completing developmental English and moving into transfer-level courses, TCC redesigned its developmental English course sequence in 2011. The former sequence, which had three levels of both reading and English (six courses in total), was compressed into a variable credit two-course sequence, English 85 and English 95, that integrates reading and English skills. For students testing at the lowest levels, the former sequence was 30 credits in total; the new model totaled 16 to 20 credits.

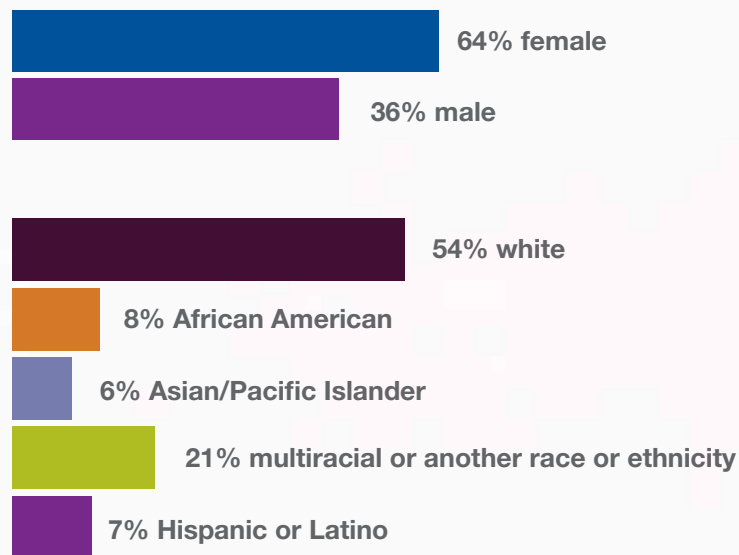
To accompany the redesign, TCC faculty participated in substantial professional development to rethink pedagogical approaches for precollege students within the new course structure. TCC's redesign was informed by Washington's renowned adult education program, Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST),<sup>1</sup> which includes a particularly intensive form of contextualization. Classroom teams of developmental education instructors and professional/technical instructors co-developed an integrated curriculum of pre-college and vocational skills training.<sup>2</sup> While TCC's Developmental English redesign does not involve

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<sup>1</sup> Through the I-BEST Demonstration Project, ten colleges, including Tacoma Community College, received grants of up to \$80,000 to test this innovation, including piloting a team-taught approach for a combined reading and writing course and for a math class integrated with a Medical Office course. See Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. *I-BEST for Developmental Education*. Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges: Olympia, WA, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. Washington State Student Completion Initiative Application Guidelines/Instructions for the I-BEST for Developmental Education Project (2011-2012). Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges: Olympia, WA, 2011.

## Student profile: Tacoma Community College



Source: *Achieving the Dream National Database*

technical instructors, the principles of contextualization and making explicit connections between classroom learning and student experience are central to the pedagogical approach at the college.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this reform effort, Tacoma has seen improvements for students and learned some valuable lessons about institutional change.

### Results

The redesign had an immediate impact on student success, as shown in the charts below. In the first year of redesign, successful developmental English course completion rose slightly. More significant improvements have been seen in the number of students who transition to and successfully complete college-level English. This final data point is the most important to TCC because it shows that the college is not simply pushing more unprepared students on to college-level. Students are more likely to take and succeed in college-level English after taking the redesigned developmental English sequence.

<sup>3</sup> For more on methods and benefits of contextualization, see Perin, Dolores. "Facilitating Student Learning Through Contextualization." Community College Research Center, April 2011.

**Successful Developmental English Course Completion for all Developmental English Students at TCC**

	Students of Color	White Students	Students who did not identify race or ethnicity
Prior to redesign	72.1%	79.3%	74.5%
First year of redesign	73.6%	79.3%	78.1%

**Transition to College-Level English for all Developmental English Students at TCC**

	Students of Color	White Students
Prior to redesign	35.2%	37.7%
First year of redesign	39.3%	42.7%

**Transition to and Completion of College-Level English for all Developmental English Students at TCC**

	All Students
Prior to redesign	27.3%
First year of redesign	33.1%



## Lessons Learned

Over the course of its redesign initiative, TCC drew several insights about the effectiveness of the reform:

- ***Figure out what works for students, and then institutionalize it.*** At TCC, the old course sequence did not work for too many students—it was complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. Rather than piloting their redesign effort and then taking it to scale, TCC decided to design the new developmental English structure based largely on what was already working for their developmental education I-BEST cohort and implemented the redesign all at once. While the I-BEST model is too intensive to scale to all students, TCC examined what aspects of it were valuable and could be expanded.

- ***Find ways to make the course material relevant for students.*** At TCC, contextualization is less about explicit connections to a student’s career and more about making sure a student can connect with the material and understand its relevance. TCC believes that students do better when they feel valued and their learning is taken seriously. The college has found the same to be true for faculty.

- ***Invest in professional development and faculty engagement.*** Getting faculty to change the way they teach requires committed resources for professional development and faculty engagement. In a series of workshops that included guided discussions about pedagogy, student characteristics, and curriculum, TCC created a safe space for faculty to experiment and learn from each other. The college did not expect immediate results, but it did expect everyone to grow and improve over time.

- ***Engage student voices to sharpen analysis and refine strategy.*** Student voices can be used to improve student success data analysis, and can help demonstrate the value of a new way of working to a broad audience. Faculty who do not see the need for change may be persuaded by learning directly from students what does and doesn’t work for them. TCC has committed to using student perspectives in evaluation efforts. The college is also using student voices to inform ongoing design work.

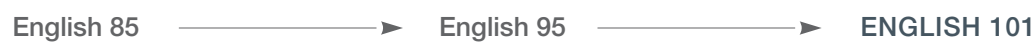
### *Developmental English at TCC Today*

The previous developmental English and reading pathway at TCC was traditional, both in terms of the course structure and teaching methods. The redesign compressed the number of course levels and integrated reading and writing, resulting in just two developmental English courses: English 85 and English 95. English 85, *Academic Reading and Writing I: Foundations*, enables students to build skills for basic analysis of texts and writing from observations and in response to readings; the course also introduces students to research and essay writing, but expectations are aligned with the introductory nature of the course. English 95, *Academic Reading and Writing II: Threshold*, prepares students for English 101 and other college courses by focusing on critical reading and analytical writing in response to readings as well as essay and research writing.

### *Former Sequence:*



### *Redesigned Sequence:*



Because TCC's administration knew some students would need additional support, they chose a variable credit approach based on placement scores. Students either enroll in an 8- or 10-credit course. Students in the 10-credit course get an extra day of instruction each week. This reduced the total credit hours for students testing into the lowest levels from 30 credits to 16 to 20 credits.

The significant reduction in courses reduces overall tuition expense and gives students a chance to stretch their Pell eligibility farther. Students who place into English 85 or 95 are encouraged to take HD101, TCC's student success course (or required to take it if they also test into developmental math), which gives students an understanding of college language, resources, technology, and expectations. This pairing also helps students get full-time status for financial aid.

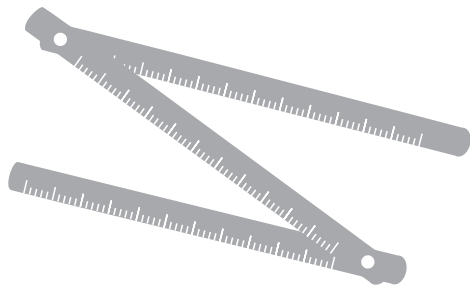
While TCC's Developmental English redesign does not involve technical instructors, the principles of contextualization and making explicit connections between classroom learning and student experience are central to the pedagogical approach at the college. As a result of this reform effort, Tacoma has seen improvements for students and learned some valuable lessons about institutional change.

## Adoption and Adaptation: Developmental English Reform at TCC

The Community College Research Center's "adoption and adaptation" framework provides a useful tool to describe the process of reform at the colleges featured in the *Right From the Start* series.<sup>4</sup> The framework lays out six components that can generate the activity and relationships necessary to sustain true reform:



## Adoption



### Diagnosis

determining the particular challenge students are facing, identifying institutional barriers, and gathering evidence to demonstrate the need for reform.



### Selection

choosing a reform model that responds to challenges identified during the diagnosis phase



### Preparation

conducting activities necessary for a successful reform launch—from curriculum development to space allocation to recruitment

<sup>4</sup> Edgecombe, Nikki, Maria Scott Cormier, Susan Bickerstaff, and Melissa Barragan, "Strengthening Developmental Education Reforms: Evidence on Implementation Efforts from the Scaling Innovation Project." Community College Research Center Working Paper 61, Columbia University, 2013.



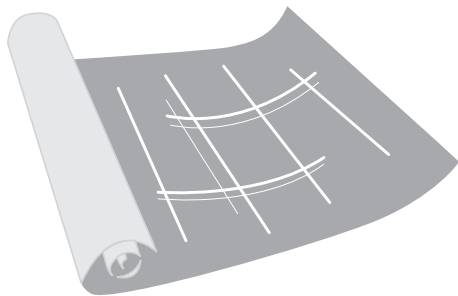


## Adaptation



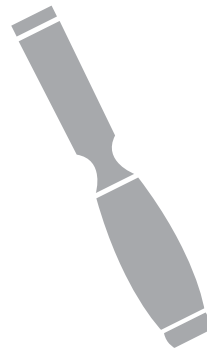
### Assessment

collecting and analyzing data about reform implementation and outcomes



### Refinement

converting data gathered from quantitative and qualitative assessment into action, improving instruction, streamlining processes, and addressing unexpected obstacles



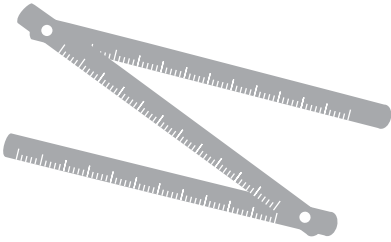
### Scaling

institutionalizing the reform with the resources needed to sustain it so that it serves all of the students who can benefit

All of these components inform each other as colleges go about the complex work of reform. Rather than a prescriptive process for a specific “best practice,” the framework clears a path for colleges to design and implement new practices and programs that meet the needs of students, respond to institutional constraints, and build capacity for continuous improvement. The following narrative details key aspects of two colleges’ reform efforts according to the adoption and adaptation framework. CCRC researchers found that when colleges conducted assessment early on in implementation, they were able to involve more people in refinements, which led to more successful growth and development of the reform. Thus, in the *Right from the Start* briefs, reform implementation is discussed between the “preparation” and “assessment” phases.





## Adoption



### DIAGNOSIS

*Diagnosis is the process of determining the particular challenge students are facing, identifying institutional barriers, and gathering evidence to demonstrate the need for reform.*

In this regard, two considerations proved central for TCC:

-  While outside mandates often pose barriers, aligning institutional reform efforts with responses required by state-level policy changes can generate momentum instead of resistance.
-  Examining how structure and pedagogy influence student outcomes—and being willing to consider drastically different approaches—can lead to creative solutions that result in better outcomes for students *and* faculty

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is the nation’s most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for student success in higher education, with nearly 200 community colleges that have adopted an institutional change process founded on five principles: committed leadership, data-informed decision making, broad engagement, equity, and systemic improvement. TCC joined Achieving the Dream in 2006.

At about the same time, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges developed the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI), which provides financial incentives for colleges to improve student success. The Student Achievement Initiative tracks student attainment of specific student “momentum points” on the way to college completion and provides financial rewards to colleges that increase student achievement levels.<sup>5</sup> One of the momentum points relates to developmental education: Points are received when students complete the highest-level pre-college course.<sup>6</sup> The state-level focus on developmental education completion rates heightened the sense of urgency regarding improving student

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<sup>5</sup> Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. “Student Achievement Initiative.” Accessed 3 October 2013. [http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e\\_studentachievement.aspx](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_studentachievement.aspx).

<sup>6</sup> Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. *Student Achievement Q&A*. Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges: Olympia, WA, 2013.

outcomes at TCC. ATD and SAI were seen as integrated initiatives; as a result the college began to look more closely at student success and at why too many students were not achieving their educational goals.

As the college looked at the data more closely, it was clear that students were struggling with the developmental English and reading course pathway. There were six courses in total:

✍ English 75	✍ Reading 75
✍ English 85	✍ Reading 85
✍ English 95	✍ Reading 95

The pathway was confusing and added complexity along the path to transfer-level courses. Some students did not understand how they could perform better in one subject than in the other, and why they would have to complete reading before moving on to English 101. Advisors found it difficult to explain those differences and knew that the pathway didn't make sense to students. Moreover, instructors were frustrated in their efforts to improve the system—reforms that had consisted of innovative but small-scale projects—and did not feel well-connected to the rest of the developmental English department.

The overarching challenge at TCC was the low rate of success among students in this pathway, particularly those who placed into English 75 or Reading 75. Recognizing that this problem needed to be addressed, Tim Stokes, then TCC's executive vice president of instruction and student services, charged two administrators—David Endicott, dean of arts, humanities, social sciences, and transitional studies and Kim Ward, associate dean of transitional studies—with directing a significant redesign initiative.



## SELECTION

*Selection is choosing a reform model that responds to challenges identified during the diagnosis phase.*

At TCC, this phase was informed by two key factors:

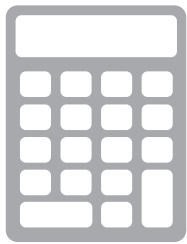
- ✍ Looking to trusted networks for examples of success and support
- ✍ Identifying innovations already in place at the college and giving faculty time and resources to incorporate what is working into new course designs

Kim Ward, a self-professed “research geek,” scanned the field and used TCC's networks from Jobs for the Future's *Breaking Through* initiative<sup>7</sup> and Achieving

<sup>7</sup> *Breaking Through* is a Jobs for the Future initiative that worked to align programs for low-skill students, accelerate students, and connect their course work to the labor market.

the Dream to identify additional ideas for structural change and professional development. One particularly influential model was the Accelerated Learning Project at the Community College of Baltimore County, which mixes students of varied skills level in the same courses and provides the lowest-skilled students with additional support. For professional development, the work of Acceleration in Context at Chabot College in Hayward, California, a program that focuses on curriculum design and pedagogy to accompany structural changes, resonated with both administrators and faculty at TCC.





TCC had already completed a cohort of developmental education through I-BEST, and the success of that program had a large influence on the redesign effort. Sabine Endicott and Blaine Hunt, now co-chairs of developmental studies at TCC, team-taught a compressed developmental English sequence to the first developmental education I-BEST cohort. They saw firsthand that basic skills students can move quickly in the right environment, and were excited by the potential for contextualization to work more broadly for TCC students. TCC's administrators also knew that some "rogue" faculty were already using contextualization in their courses, but they had no formal structure for sharing what they were learning with the rest of the department. Pairing the decision to compress the developmental English sequence with new pedagogical approaches based in contextualization and the integration of reading and writing would allow TCC to take advantage of innovative work already being done at the college.



## PREPARATION

*Preparation means conducting activities necessary for a successful reform launch—from curriculum development to space allocation to recruitment.*

This phase of the reform was informed by these key insights:

-  Drawing on the capacity and creativity of both faculty and students can spark new excitement for teaching and learning
-  Investing in professional development and faculty engagement during the design phase—and not just prior to implementation—improves the design and builds broader ownership of the reform
-  Engaging external experts can reduce tensions when a new way of working is being introduced
-  Having administrators across the college who were willing to reallocate resources in response to new processes eased the transition and improved relationships across departments at every level



Just before the redesign got under way, TCC undertook a significant reorganization that consolidated pre-college programs, which had been in different divisions. The college merged adult basic education, English for academic purposes, and developmental studies into a new transitional studies department, which became part of the arts, humanities, and social sciences division. (Developmental math remained in the math, science, and engineering department because developmental courses were already well integrated into that department.) Streamlining the pre-college programs made it easier for administrators to see the difficulty and confusion that developmental students were facing.

In light of the changes that the redesign required in TCC's enrollment management and advising, the administration decided to go full scale immediately rather than piloting the redesign with a segment of students. TCC announced the structure of the reform in Fall 2010 and gave all full-time faculty one-third release time for the next two quarters to prepare.




## Streamlining the pre-college programs made it easier for administrators to see the difficulty and confusion that developmental students were facing.

In addition to the structural changes in the developmental English pathway, TCC saw that pedagogical reform and curricular change—with an emphasis on the principles of contextualization developed by I-BEST faculty—were also necessary. The structural changes, influenced by research into promising practices, were largely designed by faculty who were involved in the developmental English I-BEST pilot; the bulk of the work involved changing classroom instruction through professional development for faculty. TCC didn't ask developmental English faculty just to adapt existing course materials to the new pathway; rather, faculty were asked to completely change the way they thought about instruction and to start contextualizing the curriculum. While this was a welcome change for many—especially those “rogue” instructors—there was also some initial resistance. Anticipating the difficulty of this change, administrators obtained significant professional development resources prior to the announcement of the redesign.

TCC hired two consultants from Chabot College's Acceleration in Context program, Tom deWitt and Sean McFarland, to lead its professional development in collaboration with a full-time faculty lead. Coming into an environment where there was a fear of experimentation in developmental studies, the consultants had to first create a safe space for faculty voices. Nearly 30 developmental English instructors were convened for a full-day retreat, with classes cancelled for the day to allow all faculty to attend. (Additional retreats were held quarterly for the first two years of redesign implementation.)

When the Acceleration in Context consultants, who were also community college faculty, arrived for the first retreat, they could sense that stakes were high for many people in the room—there was tension about how to move forward, and there was significant distance between the full-time and adjunct faculty. Despite this anxiety, the day led to a productive conversation about pedagogy and practice. The consultants asked TCC’s faculty to embrace a pedagogical shift that went deeper than merely the acquisition of new skills. They encouraged instructors to perceive themselves as designers of learning. Seeking to bring out the capacity and creativity of both students and faculty, the consultants pushed faculty to consider an inquiry-based approach to learning, and to move away from a deficit model of teaching to a mode of instruction fueled by student capacity. These difficult but enriching conversations required faculty to examine their pedagogical practice and philosophy in ways that other “professional development” hadn’t for a long time. Professional development for developmental studies faculty at TCC had previously been limited, usually excluded adjuncts, and presented methodologies in isolation. The redesigned approach was different in that it was ongoing, inclusive, and focused on actual classroom practice. The developmental English faculty were surprised by how much they didn’t know about each other, and by how much they were in agreement about wanting the best for their students. Adjuncts, who had felt disconnected from the full-time faculty, became more engaged with their colleagues in a constant exchange of ideas. They were discussing what was actually happening in their classrooms, not simply reviewing sample lesson plans. According to Kim Ward, the consultants “constantly challenged faculty to think about their assumptions and challenge themselves.” The process opened a “space of possibilities.” TCC faculty reported that the experience shifted how they thought about students, encouraging them to raise the bar about their expectations for students. The consultants also provided concrete examples of how contextualization can work in the classroom, making that approach less nebulous and more exciting.

The redesign affected more than TCC’s faculty, of course, requiring new approaches across many different college systems:

-  **Assessment:** The new structure required a reworking of ACCUPLACER cut scores that had been used for student placement in the previous pathway.
-  **Registration:** The redesign meant that the course numbering system had to change. The registrar had to be responsive and flexible.
-  **Advising:** Advisors and counselors had to learn the new courses and how to code them.

Kathryn Held, coordinator of assessment and access services, and her team committed to help make the redesign work. Converting the separate reading and writing ACCUPLACER scores into one score for placement was difficult, so TCC hired a consultant to develop a suitable formula. Once the redesign was implemented, redesigned assessment and placement procedures soon felt seamless for advisors and students. The process was made easier due to the willingness of administrators to shift resources as necessary and remain flexible about the number of sections offered based on enrollment. According to Steve Ashpole, director of enrollment services, “We didn’t say ‘Why it won’t work’, but ‘How can we make it work?’” Advisors say that the process also helped faculty and student services staff learn better ways to communicate with each other.

The process opened a “space of possibilities.” TCC faculty reported that the experience shifted how they thought about students, encouraging them to raise the bar about their expectations for students.

## LAUNCH

Implementation of the new developmental education model yielded several important benefits:

- 🔧 Re-invigorating classroom teaching
- 🔧 Helping students to become more active learners
- 🔧 Faculty ownership of pedagogical change and a new culture of experimentation and innovation



The old pathway was phased out immediately when the new courses launched in fall 2011, with the exception of a few sections offered for two quarters after the redesign to students who had already begun the old pathway. By spring 2012, all developmental English sections were using the new model.

Engaging TCC faculty in a new type of professional development sparked energy and excitement in the transitional studies department for the launch of the new curriculum. Faculty who had previously felt alienated and uninspired by the traditional curricular materials came alive in the classroom. One instructor said she went home the night of the first retreat and completely changed her course design for the quarter that began days later. Another instructor said the first retreat was a big relief—she finally felt like she had permission to teach the way she believed she should be teaching. The culture of the department changed. There was no more “going rogue”; the new expectation was one of freedom of experimentation and that faculty would share their techniques rather than hide them.

Both the structural and pedagogical changes are seen positively by faculty and students. The developmental English faculty use contextualization in a broad sense: Students learn better when the material is relevant to their lives, whether that relevance relates to their education, career, or personal lives. Sabine Endicott framed the new teaching philosophy this way:

*I don't think that students need to do skill and drill. In other words, I don't think solving ten grammar exercises is going to make students better writers, but I think that those skills need to be embedded, that they need to be part of a larger thing. Students need to be able to draw connections, connections not just between the writing, the reading, and the text, but between what they're reading and writing, the larger college community, and their lives, because that's how they make meaning.*

Rather than basing the curriculum around fill-in-the-blank textbook worksheets, faculty design courses around full-length texts and discussions. As Rachelle McGill, a developmental studies faculty member, explains it:

*One of the most important things for us to consider when thinking about our students is where they've come from, what they are expecting, and the assumptions that they have about college. There needs to be safety created in the classroom first, so that students feel like they belong. Once that community is established, they can start to command knowledge and understand the knowledge and apply that to their life and other classes.*

As an example, students planning to go into a health field can take medically contextualized English 85, where their quarter may be structured on reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* or *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. The first week of class in one such course included a discussion of “empathy” and its relevance for students going into medical professions. The instructor, Sabine Endicott, intentionally did not correct or demand one particular definition of empathy, but rather helped students make connections to other words in the root that they recognize. Students discussed their freedom to choose how to act and think; as one student said, “there are other people surrounding you and you do have a choice.” When the professor asked if students could see the relevance these kinds of conversations have for their careers, a student answered, “most of what we do, the assignments you give us, have a real-life connection.”

Students no longer see these courses as just something they need to get through. They see them as real college courses, and they are excited about the curriculum. When interviewed about their experiences in developmental English, students said that their instructors encouraged the class to act like a team, with everyone working hard together and learning from one another. One student said he saw an immediate difference in his writing skill that had paid off at work; another said that her new writing skills changed the way she composes text messages.

For some students, the type of instruction and the relevance of course content to their lives is more important than its relevance to their academic or career paths. Students say they appreciate instructors who are human and accessible, and who encourage constant discussion and questions. A student who came to TCC after a decade in the military said he grew tenfold as a writer in English 85, but also grew as a human. He explained that his time in the military had left him feeling disconnected, but that the course changed his way of thinking and helped him reconnect with his humanity.

The impetus for the reform at TCC came from the administration, but TCC’s faculty were engaged as partners in building the new model and honing the change in philosophy that accompanied the changing pedagogy. Despite initial resistance from some individuals, faculty engagement through professional development created strong ownership of pedagogical change, which in turn resulted in cultural

transformation at the college. While many faculty initially felt that the redesign was being imposed on them, they came to see that the reform would give them increased freedom in the classroom. Moving forward with a redesign so quickly and decisively can come with an emotionally exhausting backlash, but TCC's administration helped ameliorate that risk by listening with patience to faculty voices, engaging in difficult and continuous conversations, and committing to making experimentation feel safe.





## Adaptation



### ASSESSMENT

*Assessment refers to collecting and analyzing data about reform implementation and outcomes.*

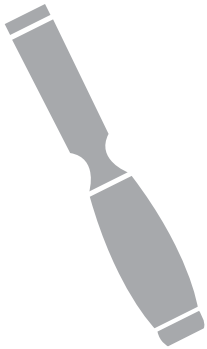
These factors proved vital in this stage of the reform:

-  Augmenting quantitative outcome data with qualitative data about student experience provides a deeper understanding of why students are or aren't succeeding
-  Gathering information from multiple college constituencies, including student services, about how a reform is working reveals additional opportunities for refinement and improvement

The redesign at TCC had an immediate impact on student success. In the first year of redesign, successful developmental English course completion rose slightly. More significant improvements were evidenced in the number of students who transition to and successfully complete college-level English. This data point is the most important to TCC, because it demonstrates that the college is not pushing more unprepared students to college level. Students are more likely to take and succeed in college-level English after taking the redesigned developmental English sequence.

Institutional Research at TCC is collaborating with the transitional studies department to determine what is working, and whether students are transitioning to college-level courses and staying on track. In addition to tracking quantitative student outcomes data, TCC has started to use student voices to evaluate courses and practices. A video made from a student panel is being used to share the success of the redesign more widely in the college community, including TCC's board of trustees.



While many of the college's systems had to adapt to the new structure, good communication and a positive attitude between different departments and functions made a quick redesign possible. Advisors and counselors say the redesign has made their jobs much easier. They can explain to students who place into English 85 or 95 that they are only a little bit shy of the level that they need to be, and that they will need the skills learned in the course to do well in college. In the past, the lengthy sequence made students feel like they had a long way to go before they were "legitimate" college students. With the redesigned sequence, they are more confident and see themselves as full-fledged college students.



## REFINEMENT

*Refinement means converting data gathered from quantitative and qualitative assessment into action, improving instruction, streamlining processes, and addressing unexpected obstacles.*

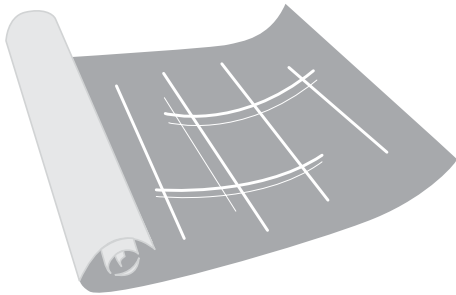
At TCC, this phase was informed by two key findings:

-  Building community among faculty can facilitate experimentation and the spread of effective practices
-  Creating a culture that is comfortable with and curious about the data is essential for improving practice

A crucial aspect of refining the delivery of developmental English at TCC has been establishing and sustaining a space where faculty can experiment collectively, determine what is working and what isn't working, and identify other approaches that should be explored. Within that context, the developmental English faculty have developed a much stronger sense of community, and more regularly make use of shared curricula, team teaching, and faculty mentoring. Faculty inquiry groups have been formed to process specific ideas and issues. There is also a stronger culture of evidence in the department that emphasizes connecting with new ideas rather than just relying on old material. Student voices are used to inform design, and students are even asked to participate in faculty retreats. Generally, faculty report being comfortable taking risks and then relying on data to see what is working.

While there is widespread agreement at TCC that the developmental English redesign was successful, the college is continuing to make changes in both structure and pedagogy. There has been some discussion about whether or not it makes sense for students to be placed into either the 8-credit or 10-credit course depending on their initial skill level; TCC is considering moving away from the

variable credit approach. Students who do well in English 85 are given the option of skipping English 95. Some sections of English 85 include a mix of students from developmental English, adult basic education, and English for academic purposes. The transitional studies department will be looking at data to see if these students do as well (or better) in combined classes.



## SCALING

*Scaling means institutionalizing the reform with the resources needed to sustain it so that it serves all of the students who can benefit.*

At TCC, the following observations informed this phase:

- 🔧 Adapting models for scale may mean translating key concepts for different student contexts and priorities, rather than scaling the whole model as-is
- 🔧 When starting at scale, institutionalization can happen by spreading practices across departments

The redesign would not have been possible without the learning that came from early implementation of I-BEST, but TCC has faced difficulty scaling I-BEST. Ideally, more students would be able to move through an I-BEST pathway, either for their professional technical programs or for transfer programs. While the model, which is resource intensive and difficult to recruit students to, may not scale easily, the principles that make I-BEST a success, particularly the idea of contextualization and making basic skills relevant for a student's academic and career track, can readily be applied across the whole of the college. In TCC's experience, students do not care as much about concrete connections of course material to their career or educational path as they do about the relevance of the skills they learn and the way those skills are taught.

The principles of the redesign, particularly the pedagogical approaches that were developed by the faculty, are beginning to spread beyond the developmental English courses. Other areas of transitional studies, including faculty in adult basic education and English for academic purposes, are aligning themselves with the developmental English approach. Students are beginning to expect this kind of teaching and TCC administrators seek ways to diffuse it across the campus.

When asked about what scale, or institutionalization, would look like once it had been achieved, David Endicott described it as follows: "When we can quit talking about it and just be doing it. When it becomes something we don't even










notice anymore.” Other TCC administrators and faculty echoed the notion that institutionalization can be said to have taken hold when change becomes normal and continuous.

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### What TCC Learned

In its redesign initiative, TCC employed a combination of strategies that it continues to use:

-  faculty inquiry
-  looking at data
-  celebrating people and success
-  cohort teaching
-  listening to and developing student voices
-  creating a safe space for experimentation
-  making sure that administrators understood faculty capacity and fears

There will always be both skeptics and early adopters in a reform effort, but there is also usually a vast middle ground of people who are trying to do their best for their students within their existing job constraints. The professional development led by Acceleration in Context taught TCC to nurture such personnel until they were comfortable giving themselves permission to grow and try new things. Because change causes anxiety, the college has learned to be patient in listening to faculty voices and opening space for people to have difficult conversations and try new things. While this focus on interpersonal dynamics may be uncomfortable for some, it is nonetheless a critical component in helping to

ensure that reform is sustainable and leads to cultural change.

The use of data in decision making and ongoing improvement is becoming a normed expectation at TCC, but administrators still see room for growth. The college wants people to be able to gather and use data themselves, but that will require more investment in technology and data tools. In addition to improving its capacity to gather and analyze data, TCC is working to find better ways to interpret data and tell the story behind it. As Mike Flodin, dean of math, science, and engineering, says, “Sometimes we measure what’s easy to measure, not what gives us the best information.” Seeking to systematize the use of qualitative data to support its quantitative metrics, TCC is looking not just at course completion rates, but also at how students express self-efficacy and how well they transition to college-level courses.

The success of TCC’s redesign created a new mentality about reform at the college. TCC learned, for example, that small-scale changes or “tinkering” will usually only create marginal changes in student success data. If an institution seeks broader improvements, a more wholesale approach to reform is warranted. TCC has also learned that what it learns through one change process can help it improve subsequent efforts.

Tom deWitt and Sean McFarland, the consultants from Acceleration in Context who helped guide TCC’s successful redesign process, suggest that the key to TCC’s success has been its commitment to honoring both the professional and student capacity to do this work. The administrators had to be patient and make the redesign feel safe for themselves and for faculty, because putting too much pressure on people for immediate outcomes can destroy an environment of experimentation and the benefits of learning from mistakes. The college also learned that dramatic reform requires substantial resources, particularly for professional development and faculty engagement.

## Another View: South Texas College

South Texas College (STC) is an Achieving the Dream college in McAllen, Texas, with more than 30,000 students. Almost 70 percent of STC students attend part-time. STC joined the ATD network in 2004. The college was designated as a Leader College in 2009, an acknowledgment of the student success improvements that resulted from an institutional commitment to continuous improvement. STC also is one of four Texas institutions that participated in the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) from 2009 to 2012. DEI, a three-year MDC initiative with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, supported 15 ATD colleges and six ATD state policy teams in efforts to identify the resources, policies, and practices necessary to scale up effective developmental education practices.

STC's DEI strategy was two-pronged, involving intensive case management for developmental education students and focusing on the improvement of the developmental education curricula through intentional content integration, or contextualization. In the design of their contextualization approach, STC drew on research about integrative learning from Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College, particularly their heuristic for developing integrated assignments.<sup>8</sup>

STC sought to facilitate students' recognition of connections among the skills they learned in developmental courses with skills needed for transfer-level courses in other disciplines. The college hoped that integration would heighten students' sense of engagement with the college and motivate them to persist in their studies. In addition, the college wanted to use the design of integrated assignments to increase collaboration among developmental faculty and to strengthen coordination across disciplines.

Specifically, STC contextualized a portion of assignments in developmental English and reading with content from college-level courses that are general education requirements in order to make the developmental coursework more relevant to the rest of students' college experience. A committee of faculty members from the reading, English, and math departments worked together with faculty from the college-level courses to design essay prompts.

The first set of assignments, written with a sociology context, comprised 20 percent of the developmental reading and English course content. The second set of assignments, which use a history context, comprised an additional 20 percent of the courses. Both sets of assignments included quantitative literacy concepts, including creating and interpreting graphs and charts and using interviews as a data source. One sociology-contextualized assignment



<sup>8</sup> FLardner, Emily and Gillies Malnarich. "When Faculty Assess Integrative Learning: Faculty Inquiry to Improve Learning Community Practice." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, Sept/Oct 2009.

for developmental English students is an essay prompt on the value of a college education, for which students are asked to read sociology articles, conduct interviews, and make a graph or chart. Another assignment is a persuasive essay about multicultural education, which directs students to use an excerpt from the sociology textbook, create graphs and charts to represent information, and conduct some basic research. The original assignments were written in 2009 and 2010. STC wrote a new set of assignments in 2011 to involve more faculty in the process and to keep the material fresh. The essay prompts are standardized to make their use easier for new instructors.

Since the implementation of the contextualized curriculum began in 2010, STC has been analyzing course completion rates for developmental reading and English, the success of developmental students in college-level courses, and the persistence of developmental students. To date, no clear trends have come into focus. However, STC has also conducted a pre- and post-course survey for developmental students, and the results support continued use of the contextualized curriculum. Moreover, in a survey, students indicated that the contextualized curriculum made them study harder, helped them see the connection between interpreting a graph and reading and writing, and improved their understanding of the connections between ideas from different courses. Even though STC's data on the impact of contextualized curricula on student success are not conclusive, the college plans to continue using the assignments.

STC sees several benefits of the contextualized curriculum for developmental students. The assignments help students prepare for the academic expectations they will face in college-level courses. The explicit connection between the courses helps students transfer the skills they develop in developmental courses to their college-level work. Additionally, students may be more motivated to succeed on the assignments. These assignments are meaningful for students because they are intrinsically more interesting. Students readily see how the assignments relate to courses they will need to complete to get a degree.

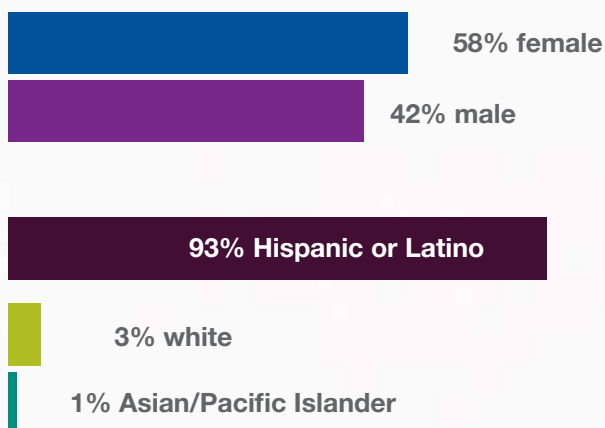
STC has also seen some benefits for faculty from the contextualized curriculum. Designing the curriculum helped link faculty from all three developmental subject areas with faculty from history and sociology, which gave instructors insight into each other's courses, built relationships for new collaboration, and improved the quality of the assignments.

While STC's curriculum reform was also implemented at scale, it is an example of how an institution can adapt a reform in a way that is less intensive but still improves the student experience.

Lessons from STC are similar to those from TCC:

- **Make developmental course material relevant for students.** STC contextualized assignments from developmental courses with content from introductory college courses that most degree-seeking students take, which allows students to see how developmental course assignments are relevant to their degree and transfer the skills they get in developmental courses to their college courses. Additionally, STC chooses topics for assignments that are intrinsically interesting and relate to many students' lives.
- **Engage faculty in the design process.** At STC, faculty were engaged in the development of the new contextualized assignments. This engagement helped foster buy-in for the contextualized curriculum, but it also built connections between groups of faculty and set the stage for additional collaboration.

### Student profile: South Texas College



Note: All figures reflect 2009 data from the Achieving the Dream National Database.





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