Patterns and Policies: The Changing Demographics of Foreign Language Instruction

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

ISBN: 0-8384-5732-0

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Changing Demographics in Foreign Language Study and the Impact upon Two-Year Colleges: A Case Study from Georgia

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Historical Overview

Community colleges, junior colleges, community junior colleges, and freshman-sophomore colleges, known collectively as two-year colleges, are a uniquely U.S. phenomenon. From their inception at the turn of the twentieth century, they democratized higher learning by putting affordable post-secondary education within reach of a great cross-section of society. This innovation also benefited senior colleges. Borchardt (1981) notes that in Georgia, and elsewhere, the early mission of two-year schools complemented that of other institutions by preparing post high-school-age students to transfer to senior or four-year colleges. According to Bahruth and Venditti (1990), this mission benefited senior institutions by enabling them to dedicate themselves to upper-division courses and research.

Soon, however, two-year schools came to be viewed as institutions responsible for educating poorly prepared students. El-Khawas et al. (1988) found that two-year colleges enroll 11 percent of high school seniors with a D average, whereas four-year colleges and universities enroll less than 1 percent of these students. Although controversial, developmental courses prepare students for the transition to regular college courses. These courses have become an important part of the two-year college curriculum offerings, especially for students who did not plan to attend college, as well as for those entering college after a hiatus since high school.

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Beginning in the academic year 1973–74, the University System of Georgia required each member institution to organize a Department of Developmental Studies or Learning Support to teach courses in three areas: math, reading, and English (Borchardt 1981). This regulation has remained in effect; at the present time, each of the 34 institutions within the University System continues to offer special developmental courses in the three aforementioned areas. In addition, students who enroll in college without meeting admission criteria in other academic disciplines, most frequently science, social studies, and foreign language, must remediate those deficiencies by earning a grade of C or better in regular college courses, not among the offerings of Developmental Studies or Learning Support.

In the mid-1980s Georgia's educational and political leaders raised admission standards at University System institutions. "And then we blinked," confessed Chancellor Stephen Portch in an article entitled "State Vows to Get—and Stay—Tough," published in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 14 May 1995. Although students were to have completed a uniform complement of college-preparatory courses in high school prior to admission to Georgia's colleges, many students were admitted without the required courses with the proviso that they pass designated college courses without receiving credit toward graduation. These regulations went into effect in 1988, and the expectation was that the need for developmental courses would diminish soon thereafter. However, on May 14, 1995 *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reported that 43 percent of the 1994 entering college freshmen at all colleges and universities were deficient in any combination of reading, math, English, science, social studies, and/or foreign language. The Board of Regents distinguishes between the 30 percent of freshmen placed into courses to develop their skills in reading, math, and/or English and an overlapping 25.3 percent who, in addition to needing development in the three aforementioned areas, may lack high school course work as a prerequisite for college admission.[1] These prerequisite courses include four years of English, two years of algebra, a physical and a lab science, and two sequential years of study in the same foreign language. Chancellor Portch outlined a ten-year plan to divert such students away from senior colleges and universities by requiring that they enter two-year schools. Consequently, the mission of academic departments at two-year colleges has bifurcated: develop the skills of large numbers of students to meet college admission standards and prepare a few non-developmental students to transfer into upper-division courses at four-year institutions.

Because many of the students with deficiencies lack the prerequisite foreign language credits from high school, the question for foreign language faculty becomes: How should instructors teach college-level foreign language courses to students who are highly likely to need remediation in English, reading, and math skills, and who may be enrolled simultaneously in science or social studies courses to remediate deficiencies? Complicating the issue, and perhaps undermining motivation, Roberts (1992) found that low or developmental English ability students often refute the need for a college foreign language requirement. McGrath and Spear (1991, p.10) compare the mission of remediation at two-year institutions to that of a safety valve, alleviating pressure from universities. They ask, "Can we take large numbers of students, many who have failed in school in the past, who have little confidence in themselves, and help them develop strong academic abilities?" In a telephone conversation in July of 1995, Donna Wilson, the two-year college representative to the Executive Board of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, likened the role of foreign language faculty at two-year institutions to teaching the last two years of high school, rather than to teaching the first two years of college. Although the establishment of two-year colleges was originally intended to prepare students to enter upper-division courses at four-year colleges and universities, that mission is changing as a direct result of more stringent college admission criteria. Simply stated, foreign language faculty at two-year colleges are remediating high school deficiencies.

Pine Crest College: A Case Study

Pine Crest College[2] is a two-year unit of the University System of Georgia. Although the present study profiles one institution, the findings were verified with and found to be similar to those of other two-year colleges in Georgia. The mission statement of Pine Crest College reflects its dual role, serving both the needs of local communities and those of the larger University System of Georgia. As is characteristic of two-year colleges, Pine Crest has a flexible or open admissions policy, admitting students who demonstrate potential for success in the programs to which they seek admission and helping those who do not demonstrate this potential through developmental courses (Gabert 1991). Pine Crest offers non-credit or leisure courses, certificate programs in secretarial skills, and lower-division courses in preparation for college and university transfer. This diversity is typical of two-year schools nationwide and reflects the fact

that many students enrolled in two-year colleges do not intend to complete a four-year degree (Berman et al. 1990; Gabert 1991). Although the numbers may be growing, in 1988 El-Khawas et al. found that nationally only 16 percent of students planning to obtain a baccalaureate degree begin their college studies by enrolling in a two-year school.

Because none of the degree programs or professional certificate programs offered at Pine Crest requires students to study a foreign language, many students do not enroll in foreign language courses. Furthermore, many four-year institutions do not have a specified foreign language requirement; instead, students may opt for various combinations of music, art, drama, speech, or literature courses to complete the humanities component of the curriculum. This represents an even more extreme version of Huber's (1992) findings and reinforces her conclusions that by not requiring language courses beyond the secondary level, post-secondary institutions convey the message that students need not continue foreign language study in college.

Students with two or more years of high school credits in foreign language who choose to continue studying the same language at Pine Crest are encouraged to skip the first, 101-level language course and begin with the second of three courses in the first-year sequence; however, enrollment beyond the first course is low. For academic years 1991–1994, an average of 9.39 students per class enrolled in courses beyond the first course in the first-year sequence, for an average of 32 students per year. During the quarters of peak enrollment, between 1.20 percent and 2.14 percent of the entire student body enrolled in French, German, and Spanish classes beyond the first course. Again, this is in keeping with Huber's (1993) finding that enrollment in advanced language courses at two-year colleges is generally common only in institutions with more than 5,000 students where six or more languages are offered.

The profile of the first foreign language (101-level) course at Pine Crest is similar to that of other two-year schools across Georgia. With few exceptions, this course serves students who have not met college admission criteria.[3] These students must earn a grade of C or better, but they do not receive course credit toward graduation. Of all students enrolling at Pine Crest in the fall quarters of academic years 1991–1994, an average of 22.25 percent had not met admission requirements for foreign language study. This figure is 27.18 percent when controlling for students exempted from admission requirements, which was the case with students who earned a GED prior to 1988, students who were foreign, non-American

students, or those who were nursing degree students. However, of all entering freshmen who did not meet one or more admission criteria, an average of 69.04 percent needed to take a foreign language course.

Numbers mask other factors that should be discussed. In theory, students may enter Georgia's two-year colleges lacking in as many as five areas required for admission to four-year institutions: math, science, English, social studies, and foreign language. Additionally, students with less than a B average in high school, regardless of course work, may be required to enroll in developmental reading, math, or English courses. Most students enrolled in foreign language courses to meet admission criteria lacked high school course work in three compound areas: math, science, and foreign language. There was one instance of a student at Pine Crest who passed a foreign language course after enrolling in nine developmental English, reading, and math courses. For the academic years 1991–1994, SAT scores of those students required to take foreign language to meet admission criteria, regardless of other combinations of deficiencies, averaged 663,[4] 324 verbal and 338 math, or approximately the 18th and 14th percentile, respectively. The average for those without foreign language deficiencies was 831. These figures compare with the 1994 national average of high school seniors of 902, 423 verbal and 479 math, reported in the 2 June 1995 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and a University System of Georgia average of 850.[5]

Success in courses taken to remediate high school deficiencies requires passing the course with a grade of C or better. On average, the success rate of such students in foreign language courses on the first attempt is 48 percent. Approximately 11 percent withdraw from courses and do not enroll at a later time at the same institution. Typically, for every foreign language class of 35 developmental students, four withdraw, 15 pass, and 16 fail. One variable in student success is the number of required developmental English, reading, or math courses students have taken. Students who take one developmental course prior to enrolling in a foreign language course have a 60 percent passing rate; and those who take two courses have a 47 percent passing rate. These rates would seem to show that students can successfully exit a foreign language course on the first attempt if they enter a two-year college needing only minor skill development. However, the success rate drops to 33 percent for students who enroll in three or more developmental courses prior to attempting a foreign language course. One reason may be the increased likelihood that these students are enrolled in multiple courses to develop their skills in English, their first language.

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Beyond first attempts in a given course, data are almost impossible to gather because many students switch languages, change schools, change programs of study, or leave college altogether. However, faculty members estimate that half of the second-attempt students pass, regardless of whether they remain in the same language or switch languages. What is certain, however, is that successful students rarely enroll in classes beyond the first course. During the academic years 1991–1994, 436 developmental students enrolled in the first of three sequential, first-year courses in French, German, and Spanish. Of the students who passed, only 18 attempted the second course in the sequence; and of that number six passed on either the first or second attempt. Of the six, one attempted and passed the third course. In sum, over the course of three years, only one student who began as a developmental student successfully completed the three courses in the first-year foreign language sequence. These attrition rates seem to be similar to those of small community colleges outside of Georgia, as reported by Maceri (1993). It is clear from these numbers that foreign language programs at two-year colleges do not have as their central mission the preparation of students for transfer into upper-division courses at four-year institutions; instead, they primarily remediate high school deficiencies.

Data detailing how many students who successfully completed the first course then transferred into the next sequential course at a four-year institution were not available; however, anecdotal evidence from students suggests that they have great difficulty completing a sequence of courses because they forget what they have learned during the interim between meeting admission criteria and completing the two-year degree and their subsequent transfer to a four-year college. Many choose to enroll in degree programs at four-year colleges that do not have foreign language admission or graduation requirements.

Implications

Extrapolating from Huber's (1996) findings showing increased enrollment in two-year colleges in states in which four-year schools required foreign language study as part of the admission criteria, Georgia's two-year schools may soon experience increased enrollment in the basic, introductory foreign language courses. According to Fountain (1993), by virtue of both their proximity to the local community and their affiliation with four-year colleges and universities, two-year institutions are "uniquely positioned"

(p. 260) to articulate the needs of both secondary and post-secondary institutions.

One example of how a two-year college is attempting to meet these needs is Held's (1994) proposed developmental Spanish course. This course, entitled Foundations of Foreign Languages: Spanish, is designed to help students who are ineligible to enroll in a regular Spanish course because they are deficient in English skills. Held describes the goal of this course as preparing students to be successful in Spanish 101. Instructors teach study skills, grammar concepts, and contrastive analysis in addition to lecturing and leading practice and drills. There are also plans for a self-paced, student-centered course as technology becomes available. Among the proposed benefits Held outlines are reduction in teaching load, improved English skills in students, and improved transition to the regular college courses.

A similar course might work well in Georgia, easing the transition into a credit-bearing course, and improving the current 48 percent success rate cited above. Since this would be a developmental, rather than a credit-awarding course, individual institutions could design the course to meet the needs of their students and circumstances. Sections could be stratified to distinguish between students who had partially completed the two-year high school requirement, those with no prior foreign language study, and those needing simultaneous development of basic skills in English and/or reading.

In addition to shifting student demographics, faculty changes must be addressed. Gabert (1991) predicts that there will be a shortage of faculty in the next decade, with approximately 40 percent of the faculty at two-year institutions retiring by the year 2000. Compounding this problem is a phenomenon that Roueche (1968) described almost 30 years ago: faculty at two-year colleges are perceived to be professionally inferior to colleagues at four-year institutions. Recently, faculty at Pine Crest have been required to earn doctorates as a condition for retention, promotion, and tenure, but this attempt at improving faculty credentials has had unexpected results. Soon after completing a doctoral degree, one faculty member left Pine Crest and accepted a position where he had opportunities to teach in his areas of expertise, rather than continue to teach introductory courses; another, unwilling to complete a doctorate, left Pine Crest to teach high school. Their vacant positions were subsequently staffed by part-time and non-tenure-track faculty.[6] Given the fact that instructors with non-terminal master's degrees successfully staffed these positions, perhaps it is

not always wise to require that two-year faculty hold doctorates. It might be argued that Developmental Studies and Learning Support faculty are not required to earn doctorates;[7] therefore, the same should be true for foreign language faculty whose teaching responsibilities are developmental in nature.

Evaluation of faculty is always a controversial topic, and for foreign language faculty at two-year schools this may be doubly true. Huber (1993) found that foreign language programs at two-year colleges are often housed in heterogenous divisions along with humanities, English, and fine arts. In instances in which administrators cannot judge a faculty member's foreign language ability, they may evaluate other aspects of overall performance, most notably the passing rate of students, end-of-term grades, and comments on student evaluations. If given only the statistics described earlier, a faculty member may suffer under the appearance that introductory foreign language courses at Pine Crest are extremely difficult and that they demoralize students. Although it has not been the case at Pine Crest, colleagues at other two-year colleges in Georgia report that they were given negative performance evaluations by administrators because of low student success rates and acerbic comments on student evaluation forms.

It has been documented that students often use course evaluations as a vehicle for registering global complaints and frustrations that are not directly related to the particular course being evaluated. Cashin (1983) warns that two-year faculty are especially vulnerable to uninformed comments because of the profile of the students they teach. These students, he argues, may read at a level below that at which the evaluation forms are written, or be unfamiliar with the vocabulary. In addition, Cashin states that students are not equipped to judge a number of aspects of teaching. Among issues of particular importance to foreign language faculty who teach developmental students are those relating to an instructor's knowledge of the field, class size, student motivation for taking the course, and whether the course is as comprehensive or challenging as it should be. At Pine Crest, students are asked to evaluate all of these except class size.

Conclusions

The Board of Regents' decision to enforce admission standards at four-year institutions is changing foreign language programs at Georgia's two-year colleges, requiring faculty to assume a role that is increasingly

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developmental in purpose. Moreover, given that the success rate of students in their first attempt to remediate foreign language deficiencies in regular college courses is slightly less than 50 percent, two-year colleges in Georgia may need to develop and implement special foreign language courses whose objective is to improve students' transition into regular credit-bearing courses. These courses could be based upon models of similar courses currently offered in developmental English, reading, and math, as well as the course described by Held (1994). Provisions may need to be made to allow two-year colleges in Georgia to hire and retain faculty to teach such developmental courses who may not necessarily hold a terminal, doctoral degree.

Notes

1. These figures were cited in a draft of a proposed policy directive on admissions suppled by the Board of Regents.
2. Those supplying data for and confirming findings of this study asked that I keep their identity, along with the identity of the institution, in confidence. A preliminary draft of this article and excerpts were read and approved by informants prior to submission for publication.
3. Figures were not available, but instructors estimated that approximately five non-deficient students per year enroll in 101 courses. These students are generally either foreign (non-American) students, or they studied another language in high school. On occasion students enroll in 101 courses despite having two or more years of high school credit. Most commonly these students have had a lapse of several years between high school study and college admission, or they attempted a higher-level language course without success.
4. Actual scores are reported in multiples of ten; therefore, the mean score of 324.0877 is closest to 320 (18th percentile) and 338.3686 is closest to 340 (14th percentile) on the pre-1995 scale.
5. The University System average is taken from the same document cited in end note 2.
6. In phone interviews in June 1996, faculty members at Pine Crest explained the reasons that the two aforementioned foreign language instructors left the college and the difficulties encountered by search committees when trying to fill the vacancies.

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7. It should be noted that these faculty members are usually non-tenure-track employees, however, and may be promoted only as high as assistant professor. Nevertheless, by virtue of their non-tenure track status, they are not held to the same standards for publication, service, and professional development as are tenure-track faculty.

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