Improving College Retention and Student Outcomes: Merging Reading Intervention with Traditional Developmental Education

Rhonda Stone, The Evergreen State College, Masters of Public Administration student and Lisa Putnam Cole, Professor of Reading, Heartland Community College

In *Pathways to Prosperity*, a report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (February, 2011), education experts and economists suggest community colleges will play a major role in America’s economic recovery. They point to 47 million new jobs available by 2018 with nearly half of those jobs fillable by individuals with an “associate’s degree or occupational certificate.” (Carnevale et al., 2012)

Substantial growth in the number of jobs that can be served by two-year degrees or certification programs is excellent news for community colleges and technical schools. Despite the news, however, a persistent problem may impede success for students, community colleges, and technical schools: lackluster retention and completion rates. Peel away the many layers associated with community college dropouts, and a core issue: is revealed: In spite of billions of dollars in investment, K-12 education in America has not yet been able to make significant gains in reading comprehension abilities for the majority of students. As a result, when students enter community college or vocational training, they are often ill-prepared to succeed.

A few community colleges in the United States are beginning to embrace a logical and practical solution. Heartland Community College in Normal, IL, is one of these. Heartland has merged traditional developmental reading programs, focused on teaching students how to process information gained from reading by analyzing and evaluating the text, making inferences, noting causal relationships, etc., with an additional tool: individualized and student-centered reading intervention to help students who don’t “get” the information in the first place. Until now, the strategy of “fixing” basic reading problems that impeded literal comprehension has not been a feature of developmental education.

“We realized that it was virtually impossible to expect college-age students to be successful with the high demands of college coursework if they couldn’t first and most importantly read and comprehend college-level texts,” states Lisa Putnam Cole, Heartland Community College Professor of Reading and coordinator of the integrated program. “We frequently encounter reading levels so low, it makes success with traditional developmental education difficult, if not impossible.”

To address the issue, Heartland became one of a dozen community colleges in the United States to introduce the Read Right® Reading Intervention Program as a part of developmental education. Read Right is one of the few reading intervention programs nationally that can be used at all age levels—elementary, middle school, high school, college, and older adults through workforce literacy. The program’s small-group tutoring methods reject the presently popular skills-based view of reading development embraced by K-12 education, which puts explicit instruction in phonics and word identification first and comprehension last, and instead embraces the view that passage reading must be developed implicitly, through the construction of a singular but complex neural network in the brain focused solely on producing reading that always results in comprehension and oral fluency.
The success of the methodology in various college settings has strong implications for attracting, retaining, and graduating more college students, but also has significant implications for the reading field itself and the future of reading instruction.

Barriers to College Enrollment and Retention

College attendance and completion rates are such a grave concern to the current administration that Vice President Joe Biden was asked to address the issue as part of the President’s Middle Class Task Force. In its 17-page report, the task force pointed toward a declining trend in college enrollment by middle-income students, as compared to enrollment trends through 1998. Causes of the decline were identified:

- Family income that does not support the cost of education.
- Insufficient knowledge and access to available methods of financial aid.
- The limitations and inequality of middle income economics as compared to the rising cost of education.

There are key issues the task force did not address. Authors in *Pathways to Prosperity* state: “... our national failure to better prepare our young people cannot be explained by poor communications or low aspirations. Rather, the paradox is that, even though young people understand they need post-secondary education to make it in 21st Century America, huge percentages continue to drop out of high school and college.” The report continues: “This crisis has been likened to a ‘silent epidemic’ that is undermining the very future of America.”

The authors observed that the drop-out rate is not limited to high school students. Community colleges have a strikingly low college completion rate (fewer than 30% complete their programs within three years.) Significantly, the report notes: The accountability revolution “has cast a harsh spot-light on our continuing failure to equip many students with even basic math and reading skills... .”

Deficiencies in basic skills are an obvious barrier to both college enrollment and completion. Reading is the essential skill that bridges academic disciplines. On September 24, 2012, the *Washington Post* reported SAT scores in reading for high school seniors are the lowest in four decades. Specifically, authors Layton and Brown observed the poor outcome put “a punctuation mark on a gradual decline in the ability of college bound teens to read passages and answer questions... .”
**What has gone wrong?** Federal, state, and local initiatives have poured literally billions of dollars into early reading instruction for a dozen years (2000 to 2012)—plenty of time for significant improvements to be realized. Instead, reading achievement remains flat or declines, resulting in students’ being unprepared for post-high school college or vocational training. The challenge for college administrators to meet the projected employment needs is great, given the stark reality of so many students unprepared to meet the demands required for successful completion of college and vocational classes.

**Reading Ability of Potential and Actual Students: Both a Problem and an Opportunity for Community Colleges**

Indeed, the news published by the Washington Post from the College Board, the organization responsible for SAT testing, is dire: In 2012, 57% of high school seniors who took the test did not score high enough in reading to predict college success. This condition fuels the potential for further erosion in the percentage of college students starting and completing college on time or at all. With the right tools and strategies, however, an opportunity exists for colleges: Course offerings to rapidly improve reading ability, providing a permanent solution for students and resulting in increased enrollment and retention rates for colleges.

In any conversation about reading, a brief discussion on the history of reading instruction is warranted. The historical assumption for reading achievement can be traced to the belief that reading ability requires the development of extensive knowledge in the areas of phonics, phonetic decoding, and individual word identification. This assumption has dominated thinking in the field of reading for more than 100 years (Matthews, 1966). In the 1970s, facing large numbers of students who struggled with reading in spite of intensive focus by teachers on the core skills, a new philosophy emerged. “Whole language” advocates believed that though word identification skills are needed for success in reading, the process is complicated and relies on predictions emanating from the reader’s knowledge of the grapho-phonetic, syntactic, and semantic aspects of language. Keeping the language “whole,” was necessary for students to develop this predictive behavior. Whole language advocates cautioned that isolated word lists and other materials focusing on individual words were to be avoided in reading instruction. They also lobbied for using good children’s literature in the classroom and avoiding too much drilling on phonics in order to motivate students to want to be readers. With the stagnancy of reading scores in the 1990s and the rise of accountability measures in education, the efficacy of whole language began to be questioned (Ravitch, 2010). By the end of the decade, two panels of academic experts had concluded that explicit skill instruction was necessary for success in reading. The National Reading Panel’s recommendations for reading instruction, bolstered by the No Child Left Behind legislation, began to drive reading instruction in America.

The solution sounded practical: train K-3 school staff members across the country to be effective teachers of basic skills, increase the time on task for students, provide adequate teaching materials, and sit back and watch reading scores begin to rise. It seemed to be a practical theory on the surface, but the promised results did not materialize. Modest gains were achieved—but only at the “basic” level. No improvement at all was realized at the proficient level. This chart, from *The Nation’s Report Card: Trends*
in Academic Progress in Reading and Mathematics (2009) documents modest gains and stagnant results in reading. The effort cost local, state, and federal governments billions in tax dollars, with the federal government alone investing $6 billion over six years.

Ironically—and indicative of the problem faced by colleges across the country dealing with large numbers of students arriving with extremely low reading skills (approximately 1 in 3 new students)—K-12 education proponents point to modest gains at the NAEP’s “basic” level as proof that the revised education is working (Ravitch, 2010). They fail to acknowledge that no improvement at all has been measured at the grade-level appropriate designation of “proficient.” NAEP definitions for the two categories clearly express that the “basic” level focuses on “word-level” reading, whereas “proficient” focuses on student ability to “integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding to draw conclusions and make evaluations.” For success in college, basic reading is not likely to be sufficient; college reading requires proficiency.

The Read Right Approach—A New Opportunity for Colleges

A report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2010 warns all levels of education that failing to read proficiently by the end of Grade 3 frequently leads to academic struggle for the rest of a student’s school career, as well as high drop-out rates. The report attributes the continuing problem to a variety of factors, but missing from the list is one possible core issue: the National Reading Panel did not correctly identify what is required for excellent reading ability to develop. In fact, one of the panel’s most experienced members, Dr. Joanne Yatvin, a former classroom teacher and school principal, called the panel’s findings “unbalanced” and, to an extent, “irrelevant” in her National Reading Panel Minority View distributed to Congress. She warned: “bad things” will happen if the federal government translates the findings into education policy—and they have happened. The anticipated improvement in performance has not happened. Yet there has been no public repudiation of the thinking that was demonstrably not true relative to what is required in early reading instruction to assure development of excellent reading abilities for all children. Low standards for reading achievement, as measured and
documented through the NAEP, are being defended in K-12 education. The continuing defense creates problems for students and colleges seeking to prepare individuals for the workforce.

Twenty years ago, Dee Tadlock, Ph.D., a past president of the College Reading and Learning Association, founded a company to make the reading methodology she developed and field tested in K-12 schools and community colleges widely available. Her company, Read Right Systems, has been working quietly for decades to document the effectiveness of a significantly different approach to reading achievement. She did not ground her work in reading theory that has been popular for over 100 years (Tadlock, 2005). Instead, she combined information from diverse areas of scientific thought: neuroscience, cognitive psychology, language acquisition theory, learning theory, a far broader and inclusive view of reading theory, and more. She focused heavily on Piaget’s observations (Inhelder and Piaget, 1969) of how very young children learn all kinds of complex tasks without explicit instruction (e.g., how to reach and grasp, roll over, crawl, talk, walk, swim, ride bikes, etc.) She also embraced emerging understanding of the brain’s natural plasticity (Allman, 1989, and Hebb, 1966) and arrived at a new theory of what is required for the development of excellence in passage reading. Specifically, she understood that individual word identification and sentence reading are distinctly different cognitive acts. To produce authentically excellent reading, the subconscious mind/brain must not focus on individual word identification. Instead, the mind/brain must put comprehension \textit{first} by anticipating the author’s intended meaning. Phonetic information is strategically sampled as needed to create the anticipatory sets that result in comprehension and to confirm or reject their validity in the face of sufficient uncertainty. This offers a sharp contrast to the reading field’s view that phonics is used for sequential, left-to-right decoding and that comprehension is dependent on mediating through oral language. Instructionally, this meant significant differences for how reading should be both taught and remediated:

- Students need basic phonics or sound/symbol information to be successful with text, but they do not need to know the 350 or so rules associated with phonics and decoding.
- Rather than focus on phonics and word attack, reading interventions must work with students in the arena of passage reading with a goal of producing comfortable oral reading that accurately conveys the author’s meaning and sounds like conversational speech. This long-held view of Dr. Tadlock’s recently was supported by the research findings of Valencia et al. (2010) in a non-associated study concluding that rapid word identification (words-per-minute, long used by the reading field as a measure of fluency) is not as predictive of comprehension as “prosody,” or the rate, stress, and intonation used by readers to convey meaning.
- Exactly what the brain must do to produce excellent reading via a strategy of anticipating meaning is unknown because, like all processes, reading operates implicitly—below the level of conscious awareness. Therefore, the main event of reading cannot be explicitly taught. Instead, each brain must figure it out for itself how to create anticipatory sets relative to the author’s intended meaning. Dr. Tadlock’s methodology constructs an environment within which each brain is compelled to do so.
• For readers with the greatest reading problems, the text must be very simple and highly predictable, decreasing in predictability and increasing in text complexity as students achieve authentic excellence with easier text. Students with less severe reading problems can enter the program at their own optimum reading levels and then work to achieve authentic excellence with developmentally appropriate text and steadily progress to more difficult levels.

The significant difference between the traditional approach to reading remediation and Dr. Tadlock’s approach is the total abandonment of word-by-word reading as the primary reading strategy. The successes of her methods suggest that focusing on individual words may be a common cause of low reading achievement.

If it is correct that K-12 education still embraces strategies that focus on word-level reading, the opportunity for colleges is to embrace “something different” and potentially transform those who graduate from high school with sub-standard reading skills into highly efficient readers who can easily and efficiently handle the demands of college-level reading and easily complete their college-level coursework. Given the fact that reading problems are common throughout America, this gives colleges the opportunity to provide fee-for-service programs not only for incoming college students, but for younger students as well, who seek to prepare themselves for college but who are not finding the solutions they need for reading achievement at the K-12 level.

Evidence of Effectiveness: Heartland Community College and Other Data

Heartland Community College’s Reading Program launched its effort to become certified by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) in 2005 with a systematic effort toward continuous program improvement. The results of a self-study completed during Fiscal Year 2008 on the existing developmental reading program, which included on-going classroom assessment and intermittent data analysis of the traditional developmental reading approach, indicated that the Reading Program was having a positive impact on students’ attitudes toward reading, but it was not succeeding in making significant improvements in their reading skills. To address this, one of the authors (Heartland’s Reading Program Coordinator) investigated options for adding a reading intervention to the developmental reading program. She specifically sought something that was different from what is traditionally done in K-12 education, assuming that traditional approaches had not been effective for the students seeking college enrollment. She found and located Read Right methodology. Impressed with the extensive K-12 data available and the emerging results with college students, she conceived a plan to complement traditional lecture instruction provided in the developmental reading courses with a lab component that would get to the heart of students’ reading problems: their basic ability to read and comprehend text.

Though Read Right was initially implemented at Heartland as a lab component for the College’s developmental reading courses, it now serves several populations:

- Academic English Language Program (AELP) for non-native speakers of English
- Adult Basic Education (ABE)
A collaborative Youth Enrichment Program (YEP) with K-12 education, offered through Community Education (for students entering grades 3-12)

Students with intellectual disabilities through the Heartland Academy for Learning Opportunities (HALO)

Heartland reading program staff members have observed impressive gains in reading ability with all of the student groups—a surprising achievement considering the variety of age levels and diversity of student reading problems.

Heartland has formally assessed the progress of developmental reading students in a variety of ways. In the first chart, the success of students in Psychology 101 and Sociology 101 courses is examined. The data indicate a significant difference in the ability of former developmental reading students to obtain grades of A, B, or C after the addition of Read Right to the developmental reading program. With the addition of Read Right, former developmental reading students began to perform in their 101 courses nearly as well as regular college students who passed the college entrance exam in reading and never needed developmental reading assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HCC Psychology 101</th>
<th>HCC Sociology 101</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total N FY 2009</td>
<td>Fiscal Year 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success Rate (A,B,C)</td>
<td>Traditional program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Students</td>
<td>1261</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Students</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tiara Randle, a certified elementary teacher working in the Heartland Reading Lab as a reading facilitator notes: “Read Right intertwines everything. They are working on the language, and yet they are still working on comprehension and knowledge that they can take with them.”

At the end of the 2010 school year, 117 Heartland students completed a survey relative to their perceptions of Read Right (Designated as “READ 091” by the college). The survey revealed:

- 99% indicated they feel they are a better reader as a result of being in Read Right
- 91% indicated they feel that improved reading has improved their attitude toward school
- 91% indicated they feel they do better in other classes as a result of the improvement in reading they have made in Read Right
- 98% indicated they feel better about themselves since their reading has improved
Heartland Community College Implementation Milestones

10/2008  • Site visit to observe program at Ashland Community and Technical College (KY)
         • Team presented observations, impressions, and findings to College community

12/2008  • Logistics study completed

7/2009   • Read Right implementation included in FY 2010 budget
         • Search for Read Right Facilitators initiated and completed

Fall 2009 • Read Right’s tutor training model implemented, funded through Instructional Services.
           Four facilitators (1 full-time, 3 part-time) trained

Spring 2010 • Training continues: 4 facilitators serve most sections of developmental reading.
               • An AELP class is added and facilitators are certified as achieving competency in the tutoring model

Fall 2010 • Train-the-Trainer model implemented: 1 Heartland trainer (full-time) trains 8 new facilitators (all part-time) to serve all sections of developmental reading and additional sections of AELP
           • An ABE class is added.

Spring 2011 • A second Read Right classroom is added, funded through Adult Education.
               • Train-the-Trainer model continues: Heartland trainer trains 4 new facilitators (all part-time) to serve developmental reading, AELP, additional sections of ABE.

Fall 2011 • Train-the-Trainer model continues: 1 Heartland trainer (full-time) trained 2 new facilitators (both part-time) to serve developmental reading, AELP, and ABE.
           • YEP classes and HALO students are added

Spring 2012 • Heartland trainer achieves certification after demonstrating competency and continues training and supervising tutors for developmental reading, AELP, ABE, YEP, and HALO programs.

Fall 2012 • Associate Director of Reading Center position (full-time) approved.
           • Train the trainer model continues (1 additional trainer in training). Two Heartland trainers (both full-time) are training 6 new facilitators (all part-time) to serve developmental reading, AELP, ABE, YEP, and HALO.

Other college and adult programs report impressive results:

• To date, Midlands Technical College (MTC) in Columbia, SC, is the only college that has compared retention rates of developmental reading students with and without the Read Right program. The data indicates that Read Right students remain in school at significantly higher rates:
  
  **Fall to Spring:** Read Right Students = 95%; all other developmental students = 74%
  
  **Spring to Fall:** Read Right Students = 66%; all other developmental students = 35%

Additionally, MTC documented the difference in growth in reading ability between developmental reading students not required to attend Read Right and those required to
attend. Those not attending averaged 1.1 grade levels of gain over one course period. With 38 hours of tutoring, MTC Read Right students averaged 2.4 grade levels of gain. Dr. Mary Gene Ryan, MTC Retention Coordinator states: “Read Right has become the basis for a 3-credit hour course that is going to be required for all students who score between 36 and 60 on the COMPASS-R [reading] placement test. Tuition revenue generated through the course is projected to cover the [program costs].”

- At Ashland Community College in Ashland, KY, 99% of students said they were satisfied with the program; 93% said they did better in other classes as a result of Read Right, and 93% said they would recommend the program to other students. The average gain in reading ability in one semester was 1.7 grade levels.
- At Century Community College in White Bear Lake, MI, 100% of students said they were somewhat or much better readers as a result of the program, 100% said they would somewhat or definitely recommend the program to others in need of reading assistance, 94% said their self-confidence had somewhat or definitely improved; 97% said they did better in other classes as a result of Read Right; and 83% said they were more hopeful of finding a job now that they had improved their reading skills. Additionally, the college documented significant and continuous progress of students from lower level reading ability to college-readiness.
- Out of 451 students at Ozarks Technical College in Springfield, MO, 338 developmental reading students (80%) passed their developmental reading course after Read Right tutoring. Significantly, 220 students (49%) scored 81 or higher on the COMPASS post-test, indicating that they needed no additional intervention in reading.
- At Spokane Falls Community College in Spokane, WA, 47 students received an average of 27.6 hours of Read Right tutoring. Students were pre- and post-tested before and after tutoring using the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS). By Washington State standards, gains averaging between 3 and 5 are considered successful programs. The average gain for the 47 Read Right students was 6.3, significantly exceeding the range considered successful. The average amount of instructional time was 28 hours of tutoring per student, far less than the 40 hours recommended by the state.
- In 2005, The North Dakota Department of Corrections introduced the Read Right Reading Intervention Program for 279 students incarcerated in juvenile facilities. The results were so significant that the state quickly moved to adopt the reading intervention program for all incarcerated adults. To date, the Read Right program serves all prison inmates in the state of North Dakota (male and female).

**CONCLUSION**

With 47 million jobs to fill in the coming five years, community colleges and technical programs will play a key role in filling the need. The ability of colleges to enroll, retain, and graduate students is challenged by the reality that significant numbers of students are not performing well in reading, a critical area for college retention and completion. The opportunity for community colleges is to add effective reading intervention to the traditional developmental reading program. Such an opportunity has the potential to
help a variety of students complete college on time, with the added potential of serving the greater community at-large as elementary, middle, and high school students seek fee-for-service solutions to widespread reading problems. Community colleges could purposefully seek programs that reflect new thinking about reading and reading development. A variety of college systems have found such a program in the Read Right Reading Intervention Program and they attest to its effectiveness.

References:
Harvard Graduate School of Education (February 2011). *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*.