Neoliberalism and Developmental Education: Complexity and Contradictions in California Community Colleges

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Abstract
The egalitarian mission of community colleges to provide an open access to educational opportunities for all often contradicts the high academic standards for college readiness, and therefore establishes the need for developmental education. Beginning in the 1970s, neoliberalism as a form of governmentality gradually invaded schools and public services including developmental education in a community college level. This paper explores the neoliberal influence on developmental education in three aspects: the effect of decreased institutional funding for the community college system and increased cost of higher education for students in developmental education, increased curriculum management and accountability expectations on a state level and its reflection on developmental education, and treatment of students in developmental education as consumers individually responsible for their own performance.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, Developmental Education, Academic Capitalism, Marketization of Education

Author Statement
I am a community college administrator and faculty at California State University, San Bernardino. My research interests include developmental education, academic tenacity, student success, social justice and equity.

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Public community colleges served as a gateway for higher education for 43% or 10.5 million undergraduate students in the United States in 2011-2012 (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Historically, community colleges, a unique American invention, came into existence to materialize the American dream of a land of opportunities and, therefore, to provide open access to higher education to all. As Cohen and Brawer noted in *The American Community College*, “the easily accessible, publicly supported school became an article of American faith” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 3). According to this functionalist approach, community colleges democratize higher education by making it more accessible, serve the economy by providing vocational training, and contribute to the selective function of the four-year universities by attracting less academically prepared students (Dougherty, 2001).

Expressing a contrary view, Bowles and Gintis defend an instrumentalist Marxist position on education (Dougherty, 2001) as a replica of class stratification that reproduces social inequality at public expense (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bowles & Gintis, 2003; Bowles, Gintis, & Meyer, 2003). From an institutionalist point of view, Brint and Karabel (1989) criticized community colleges for performing contradictory functions, such as extended opportunities and social selection which resulted in the “diversion effect” and lower educational attainment (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Community colleges originated from social needs in the last decade of the 19th century, and the niche they occupy was officially acknowledged in the stratified system of higher education established as official policy with the California Master Plan (1960). However, the egalitarian mission of community colleges to provide equal opportunities for all students who desire college education contradicts the high academic standards for college readiness, which most students do not meet. As a result, courses to remediate the lack of sufficient academic skills in English reading, writing and math began to sprout. The first remedial course was offered at Harvard in 1874 in response to faculty complaints about students’ low writing skills (Arendale, 2011). Since then, remedial education (renamed to a softer term “developmental” in order to depart from the negative connotation of remediation; terms used interchangeably in this paper), has grown to serve the needs of 51.7% of community college freshmen (Complete College America, 2012). In mathematics the percentage is even higher, up to 70% (Bailey et al., 2015). In some states such as Indiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee, community colleges are the sole providers of remediation because four-year institutions are prohibited from offering remedial courses (Long & Boatman, 2013). A study conducted by the Strong American Schools organization (2008) estimated the annual cost of remediation to be between $1.88 and $2.35 billion at the community college system alone.

In the late 1980s, a new economic shift known as Thatcherism (The United Kingdom) and Reaganism (The United States) began transporting neoliberal ideas of a market-oriented economy to all social spheres including education. Neoliberalism influenced education dramatically by assuming a new role of the state in educational affairs by shifting focus from a public-good orientation to “academic capitalism” (Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009). Neoliberal ideas influenced higher education by championing a reduction of state funding, the perception of academic knowledge as a commodity, knowledge production as a business
enterprise, promoting an emphasis on mirroring market forces in educational policy, the rise of merit-based as opposed to needs-based scholarship, increased treatment of students as consumers, dependence on student loans rather than grants, disproportionately increased accountability, and extensive evaluation and assessment (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 2002; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2006; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005; Rhoads, Wagoner & Ryan, 2009; Torres & Rhoads, 2006). From a state relative autonomy perspective, which this paper supports, motivated by self-interest and constraint by business-controlled resources, policymakers became major players in the educational field by infusing their own ideological preferences (Dougherty, 2001). Directly or indirectly, neoliberal ideas have influenced changes in policies and practices in the community colleges and in developmental education.

**Theoretical Framework**

As a form of governmentality (Foucault, 2010), neoliberalism was first installed in schools and in public services in the 1970s. The leaders in this movement were the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand while others, like Sweden, have adopted only a small part of neoliberal policies and practices (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Apple (2000) argued that an educational policy agenda in the neoliberal state emphasizes the connection between educational institutions and market fairness (Apple, 2000). As stated in *Between Neoliberalism and Neoliberalism and Neoliberalism in a Global Context (2000)*, public education institutions are viewed from a neoliberal perspective as “the black holes into which money is poured” (Apple, 2000, p. 59). The effects of market-driven education shift emphasis “from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (Apple, 2004, p. 20). As a result, educational policy influenced by a narrowly defined economic rationality tends to eliminate social interventions into inequality and focuses on individual choice and responsibility, privatization, and marketization (Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009).

Individual subjects have thus welcomed the increasing individualism as a sign of their freedom and, at the same time, institutions have increased competition, responsibilization and the transfer of risk from the state to individuals at a heavy cost to many individuals, and indeed to many nations (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249).

From a neoliberal perspective, the perception of knowledge has changed. From Michel Foucault’s point of view, scientific knowledge is a product of particular “regimes of truth” grounded in the relationship between power and knowledge (Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008, p. 16). Market-driven ideology led to the emergence of an academic capitalism knowledge regime, valuing “knowledge privatization and profit-taking in which institutions, inventor faculty, and corporations have claims that come before those of the public” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, cited in Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009, p. 11).

Widely used measures of success are results of testing. Escalating demands for accountability combined with scarce resources led to increased marketization and competition in all levels of the educational ladder. Standardized curricula and common assessment measures resulted in less diversity and privileged students from a higher socio-economic status. As Apple (2004) argued, national curricula and national outcome comparison are essential steps toward increased marketization. They actually provide the mechanisms for comparative data that “consumers” need in order to make informed decisions. Evidently, the state shifts the blame for inequalities in access and
outcomes from itself onto the individuals (Apple, 2004). At the same time, students from more affluent families who possess “class habitus” convert their socio-economic status into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result, there is a strong relationship between academic performance and poverty, where class and race characteristics of students from low-income, working class families, African American or Latino/a descent, and other students with diverse backgrounds are seen as less worthy of attention (Apple, 2004).

Methodology

The research question this analysis aims to examine is: in what ways has neoliberalism impacted developmental education in the California Community Colleges?

The literature review conducted for this study is based on an online search pertinent to the topic of interest, the intersecting terms “neoliberalism,” “community college,” and “developmental education” researched through the ERIC and EBSCOhost databases. Further development of the conceptual framework was built on the references from the articles on the neoliberal ideology at community colleges. From the review of literature, three main interrelated themes of neoliberal influence emerged: funding, accountability, and educational consumerism.

Institutional funding was analyzed through budget appropriations in the last decade. California Postsecondary Education Commission Fiscal Profiles from 2001 to 2008 were the main source of data in terms of general fund appropriations, student tuition and fees averages, and student financial aid awards. Increased management demands and accountability were investigated through the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office reports, information drawn from the statewide Community Colleges Score Card, and the conceptual work of leading authors in the field. The treatment of developmental education students as consumers was drawn from policy briefs and academic, peer reviewed articles published in the last decade. Even though some data was synthesized in tables and graphs beginning in the 1970s, the primary sources of this research were limited from 2000 to present.

Findings

Three main themes emerged and are examined closely in this paper: the effect of decreased institutional funding for the community college system and increased cost of higher education, including for students in developmental education, increased curriculum management and accountability expectations on a state level and its reflection in developmental education, and treatment of developmental education students as consumers individually responsible for their own performance.

Funding

Analyzing data from 1970 to 2005, Rhoads et al. (2009) compared expenditure data of the University of California, California State University and California Community College systems based on enrollment and funding by full-time equivalent students (FTES). The data shows a steady overall decline in state support for higher education from a high of 16.6% in 1970-71 to a low of 11.4% in 2005-06 (Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009). The authors concluded that by the 1990s, twenty years after its initiation, nearly all facets of the State had come under the influence of neoliberal economic policies and practices. Due to the tremendous growth of California community colleges the percentage of funds they received doubled in the 35-year period examined by the study. However, a more accurate picture emerged when the data was analyzed on the basis of FTES. Community colleges historically have received and continue to receive significantly lower funding per FTES (see Figure 1).
Considering the fact that community college students are overwhelmingly attending on a part-time basis, the results are intensified even further. In other words, if community colleges have to serve two or three students to qualify for state funding for one FTES, their resources are much more strained because more students will need services, such as advising, parking, facilities, and so on. As the authors concluded, community colleges and their students are supported to a much lower degree than students in other higher educational institutions, such as the University of California and California State University (Rhoads, Wagoner, Ryan, 2009).

Placement in developmental courses required as a prerequisite for a degree or transfer, cost students the same as college level courses. Thus, taking on average between a semester and two years, remediation has also financial consequences. Long (2014) contended that longer time to complete their studies could affect a student’s financial aid, as a student’s eligibility for aid may expire. Students who need to complete significant remediation could run out of financial support before being able to finish (Long, 2014). Even though the annual tuition and fees for full-time community college students in California, $1429, is relatively lower than the $3,264 nation average, it may affect students that need financial assistance the most (College Board, 2016).

In conclusion, the increasing costs of tuition and dwindling availability of financial aid should be taken under consideration because developmental coursework creates extra burdens for students especially students of color (Solorzano, Acevedo-Gil, & Santos, 2013).

**Obsession with Accountability**

The accountability movement emerged in the 1970s in the United States and with the advance of neoliberal ideas in education evolved into a system of high-stakes
standardized tests and privatized school choice. In the early 1980s,

The rhetoric, discourse, and purpose of accountability shifted from a primary concern with optimizing the relation between resource inputs and educational outputs, to a relentless drive to create policies and practices that aim to produce social conditions and forms of subjectivity consonant with the creation and efficient operation of market culture. (Ambrosio, 2013, p. 317).

From a Foucauldian perspective, the neoliberal accountability system is a manifestation of disciplinary power that seeks to control the conduct of individuals and produce certain forms of subjectivity (Ambrosio, 2013). To reiterate, the neoliberal management installed in the society included increased exposure to competition, amplified accountability measures and emphasized implementation of performance goals (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Even though there is an ambiguity in the definition of accountability, its common features from a neoliberal perspective include treatment of students as consumers individually accountable for the educational choices they make, obsession with test-driven accountability, and auditable fiscal responsibilities of each educational institution. Increased reliance on self-services starts from mandatory college admission. Since its initiation in 2001, CCCApply, a statewide online admission application center for California Community College, has become a self-service agency for 104 out of 113 community colleges in California and currently processes 80% to 100% of all college applications. Also, 32 colleges offer the Board of Governor Fee Waiver application online using the CCCApply portal. In 2012, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors endorsed the 22 recommendations of the Student Success Task Force Initiative. Major recommendations address collaboration with K-12 system, student intake and support services, and accountability (CCCCO, 2016). Core services such as orientation, assessment, and student education planning are moving digital and companies as Comevo have already launched LaunchTM Online Orientation Software to help “clients” in higher education to complete core services on their own (Comevo.com). Self-selection of courses and self-registration is another evidence of accountability placed on the individual.

In community college settings, neoliberalism also translates into reduced federal and state responsibility in students’ financial decisions and, therefore, increased dependability on student loans, test-driven measures of performance outcomes for college access and success, and increased reliance on grants for programs, departments, and initiatives, for which educational institutions need to compete.

In California, as Hom (2008) noted, legislative accountability efforts gained prominence in the 1990s under an agreement known as Partnership for Excellence (PFE). This agreement produced additional funding for the community colleges and was the first wide-ranging accountability effort undertaken by the state’s community college system; however, “it hardly satisfied the executive branch’s interest in accountability” (Hom, 2008, p. 9). A step further was taken with Assembly Bill 1417 in 2004, which triggered the creation of a performance measurement system for the California Community Colleges, known as Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC) (Focus on Results, 2012). The ARCC pilot report for the Legislature was completed in 2007 as a collaboration between colleges and advisory structure, a panel of national experts, the Legislative Analyst’s Office, the Department of Finance, and the Secretary of Education (Focus on Results, 2012). The table in Figure 2 displays the performance indicators presented in the last ARCC report (2012).
Figure 2: College Level Performance Indicators Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Indicators</th>
<th>State Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student Progress &amp; Achievement (2005-06 to 2010-11)</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Completed 30 or More Units (2005-06 to 2010-11)</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Persistence (Fall 2009 to Fall 2010)</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Vocational Course Completion (2010-11)</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Basic Skills Course Completion (2010-11)</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ESL Course Improvement (2008-09 to 2010-11)</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Basic Skills Course Improvement (2008-09 to 2010-11)</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The basic skills course completion rate in California stated in the table above, 62%, gives an impression of pretty decent achievement. The numbers breakdown is presented in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Pre-Collegiate Improvement: Basic Skills, ESL, and Enhanced Noncredit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Successful Course Completion Rate for Credit Basic Skills</th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


However, analysis of these results reflects a completion of at least one remedial course, which boosts the numbers, while, in reality, the consequences of remedial course completion means that roughly two-thirds of students who enrolled in each of the remedial mathematics and writing sequences and nearly three-quarters of students who enrolled in a remedial reading sequence do not proceed further and do not earn a degree (EdSource, 2010).

Another indicator of neoliberal policies in education is the dependence on financial aid that a growing number of students apply for and, therefore, take personal responsibility for their financial decisions. There is no difference between students taking developmental courses and those taking degree-applicable or transferable courses in terms of applying, receiving, and exhausting financial aid. The total cost of financial aid for the decade from 1992 to 2002 is summarized in Figure 4.

With the student count increased three times from 1992 to 2003, student aid grew almost four times, which means greater dependence by students on outside sources for funding their higher education endeavors. In addition, in his comparative analysis of the California higher education system represented by the California Community College, California State University and University of California, Heller (2003) argued that “over the last two decades, students and their families have been paying an increasing share of the cost of education in all three systems” (Heller, 2003, p. 16).

Another indicator of neoliberal accountability is the reliance on standardized tests, which plays a critical role in students’ placement in remediation. According to research, two-year colleges almost exclusively use brief, standardized tests administered to new students just prior to registration to determine who should be placed into remediation. The strong reliance on a single exam is fraught with problems, however, and...
high-stakes placement exams are poor predictors of college readiness (Complete

**Figure 4: State of California Financial Aid Distribution**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992/3 Student Count</th>
<th>1992/3 Award Count</th>
<th>1992/3 Aid Amount</th>
<th>2002/3 Student Count</th>
<th>2002/3 Award Count</th>
<th>2002/3 Aid Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State of California Total</td>
<td>186,122</td>
<td>395,220</td>
<td>$233,016,237</td>
<td>561,814</td>
<td>1,865,425</td>
<td>$893,575,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants Total</td>
<td>113,939</td>
<td>177,561</td>
<td>$151,985,073</td>
<td>245,812</td>
<td>670,457</td>
<td>$645,968,736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Loans</td>
<td>18,203</td>
<td>19,608</td>
<td>$37,076,557</td>
<td>30,118</td>
<td>66,686</td>
<td>$103,710,915</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


College America, 2012). Looking at two large community college systems, Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2012) find that approximately one in four and one in three test takers in math and English, respectively, are severely misassigned under current test-based policies. They conclude that more students are incorrectly assigned into remediation than are incorrectly passed on to college-level coursework (cited in Long, 2014). Bailey et al. (2015) also confirmed that in regards to developmental education, standardized tests are not reliable to clearly distinguish between students who are college-ready and those who lack sufficient skills to start college level courses (Bailey, Jaggers, Jenkins, 2015).

**Individualism**

Individualism, as a central tenet of neoliberal educational policy relates to the idea that the free market best enables fair competition between individuals (Rhoads, Wagoner, Ryan, 2009). In higher education, neoliberal individualism is manifested by the increasing individual cost placed on students, both through amplified reliance on student loans and increased tuition rates. Even though student fees at California community colleges have traditionally been kept as low as possible (there were no charges for community college enrollment until 1983, in 1984 the fee was $5 per unit, and currently community colleges in California charge $46 per unit). In accordance with the market-oriented philosophy of education, in times of financial crisis, which seem ongoing, the burden of the cost is placed on consumers - the students.

Evidently from the table in Figure 5, the state funding for California community colleges varies tremendously in the range of 10.6 billion dollars in accordance with the market economy and mirrors the financial crisis of the state.
A result of the financial problems in 2001 was that student fees increased from $11 to $18 per unit in 2003 and then from $18 to $26 in 2004. Along with the effects of budget cuts in education in California, increased student fees had a devastating effect on community college enrollment and affected students taking developmental courses as well. The funding per full-time equivalent student (FTES), where developmental courses count, fell 5.9% between 2001-02 and 2003-04 (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008). There has been an 11.3% increase in general funds to community colleges since then, but this is equivalent to only $559 per full-time student. Including analysis of tuition and fees as an additional source of revenue, Rhoads, Wagoner and Ryan (2009) argued that funding in the California public higher education system increasingly supports a pattern of individualization, consistent with the rise of neoliberalism: the most elite levels of the California public higher education system are increasingly a domain for those with financial resources, while the state community colleges are a more likely option for low-income students. As the authors concluded, such an outcome reflects a market-oriented mentality and exists in opposition to a vision of the community college as a social intervention and a gateway to higher education (Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009).

Conclusion

Long (2014) proposes three measures to alleviate the problems in developmental education. First, to improve placement in college remediation classes is the initial step to better tailoring supports for their needs. Better assessment is also necessary to reduce the number of students who are incorrectly placed into remediation due to an opaque process or bad testing day. Secondly, she suggests providing better college remediation services by using technology, support services, and innovative pedagogies. Thirdly, she...
argues for adopting measures to prevent the need for remediation. Several states, including California, are encouraging students to take college readiness assessments in high school, so that they can use this early information to make better course selections.

A more radical idea, to start college courses with support, is proposed in the Complete College America analysis. Instead of wasting valuable time and money in remedial classes for no credit, students have been proven to succeed in redesigned first-year classes with built-in, just-in-time tutoring and support (Complete College America, 2012).

Another possible solution would be implementing best practices in restructuring remediation proposed and successfully implemented by the California Acceleration Project (2010 to present) as part of the California Community Colleges Success Network (3CSN). Also, according to a long European tradition, courses in mathematics can be eliminated for all college majors in the humanities accepting the successful completion of high school requirements in mathematics as satisfactory for students who choose to continue their education in the humanities. It seems like reducing or eliminating remediation would decrease the adverse effect of neoliberal policies in higher education at least to certain extent.
References


