

Why We Need to Increase Our Understanding of Teaching and Learning in Developmental Education

By: Thomas Bailey, Director, Community College Research Center – February 2012

As director of CCRC, I am very pleased to respond to the [inaugural issue of *Inside Out*](#), a publication of the Scaling Innovation project. Although CCRC has a long history of research on student success in community colleges, including a robust research agenda on developmental education, this endeavor marks a new direction for CCRC: classroom instruction. This work involves deepening our partnerships with practitioners and feeding our research findings back in deliberate and useful ways.

All too often, researchers, reformers, and policymakers shy away from examining the demanding and complex work of teaching and learning. Yet, the persistent challenges we face in substantially improving student outcomes make it imperative that we turn our attention to what happens in the classroom and figure out how to build on the pockets of excellence and innovation present on many college campuses. Scaling Innovation undertakes both of these objectives. In collaboration with three innovation partners and their replicating colleges, Scaling Innovation allows us to examine the dynamics of teaching and learning within community colleges while also improving our understanding of how local innovations can be leveraged to promote more meaningful changes in developmental education.

In tandem with its focus on the classroom, what makes this project so exciting is its emphasis on faculty's role in the reform and research process. Scaling Innovation is not only charting new territory in community college research but also changing the conversation around who should be involved in the reform process from the beginning.

Too frequently, faculty are absent from research and policy discussions despite the obvious role they have to play in improving student outcomes. Reforms are often presented to faculty

without much discussion about how the proposed changes will address students' needs. However, early observations from the project make clear the necessity of faculty involvement in developing and overseeing a reform in order to make it successful. Scaling Innovation will explore the experiences of faculty as both teachers and reform leaders within instructional innovation.

It is not enough, though, to acknowledge the importance of faculty in the reform and research process; they need support in their efforts. Scaling Innovation seeks to understand how faculty can and should be supported to meet their reform goals. Many existing support systems have proven ineffective, both in helping faculty think about their practices and in sustaining their engagement with a reform. Without a clear picture of what type of faculty development is necessary during reform and how those opportunities can be structured, few innovations are able to succeed, much less expand in reach.

The need for effective faculty supports became apparent to me after attending the Scaling Innovation Partners Convening, held earlier this year at Teachers College, Columbia University. Throughout the day, participants echoed one another in stating the benefits of sharing their practice and getting feedback from colleagues, whether it be through classroom observations, exchange of student work, or other avenues. During one breakout session, faculty reviewed student essays together, identifying areas of strength that instructors could build on to help students improve their writing skills. While these types of interactions were clearly useful to the faculty, participants acknowledged how challenging it is to bring faculty and other stakeholders together on a regular basis, due to scheduling and financial constraints. Despite these impediments, the enthusiasm of faculty and administrators at the convening demonstrated that it is both possible and necessary to create meaningful opportunities for faculty collaboration and learning.

The last several years has seen a dramatic increase in efforts to improve outcomes for community college students. But while the resulting initiatives are encouraging, widespread engagement of faculty and explicit efforts to improve classroom instruction have, in far too many cases, not played a central role in these reforms. At CCRC, we are excited to be involved in Scaling Innovation, an initiative that directly addresses both of those deficiencies. We are grateful to the Hewlett Foundation for providing the resources for the project, and we are honored to work with an outstanding group of faculty leaders.