Internal Conflict: Community College Presidents and Developmental Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of community college presidents regarding developmental education. A mixed method sampling technique combining convenience and purposeful sampling was used to identify five presidents in North Carolina and three presidents in Virginia to participate in the study. Results of the study could prove significant for community college leaders in terms of supporting academically underprepared students from the president's perspective and understanding methods to improve developmental education. The primary source of data was from semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour conducted with each president.

Developmental education (DE) courses and programs strive to assist students who are academically underprepared, but the success rates and outcomes of these students have received criticism from researchers and legislators. Consequently, some politicians, educational leaders, and researchers now recognize DE outcomes as a major barrier in higher education (Brothen & Wambach, 2004; Complete College America, 2012). The chief criticisms of DE have been that too many students need remediation, most students do not progress to college-level gateway courses, and most remedial students never graduate (Complete College America, 2012). Tierney and Garcia (2008) wrote, "The topic of remediation is of public policy concern on national, state, and institutional levels, but a solution has proven elusive" (p. 3). Indeed, a simple solution for assisting DE students does not exist.

The criticism associated with negative outcomes in DE has spurred reform in several community college systems across the nation. For instance, in Florida, DE is now optional for students (Fain, 2013). The California Basic Skills Initiative provided supplemental funding for colleges to redesign developmental instruction, track learning outcomes through a statewide accountability report, and implement ongoing professional development (PD) for instructors (Basic Skills Initiative, 2009). North Carolina and Virginia redesigned both the content and delivery in similar ways to reduce the time students needed to spend in DE (Venezia & Hughes, 2013). Recommendations abound for improvements in assessment and placement, addressing non-cognitive skills, accelerat-

ing curriculum, and more accurately, aligning DE and college-level coursework (Bailey, Jaggars, & Clayton, 2013). Other recommendations for program reform include refining literary skills development courses, integrating alternative teaching and learning approaches, using theory to inform practice, integrating students into curriculum courses, and adjusting program delivery according to the institution (Brothen & Wambach, 2012).

As a service for students, DE plays an important function in the community college landscape while simultaneously receiving a great deal of both scrutiny and support. Reform efforts in states such as North Carolina and Virginia have led to curriculum and placement changes in an effort to move students beyond DE in an efficient way. In order for such critical alterations to take place at the state and institutional levels, community college presidents, who are chiefly responsible for the quality and strategic direction of their institutions, had to be invested and committed. Historically, leadership and administrative support have been critical in order for DE to provide students paths to success and for programs to thrive (Boylan, 2002; McCabe, 2003).

During a period when DE receives a great deal of criticism from policymakers and other stakeholders, it is worthwhile to consider the work of community college presidents who arguably possess the greatest level of influence at their respective institutions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of community college presidents related to DE and determine the extent to which these presidents considered DE an institutional priority.

Literature Review

Due to limited research concerning community college presidents' perceptions of DE, a notable gap exists in existing literature. The former Community College of Denver (CCD) president, Byron McClenney cited serving students who are underprepared as an institutional priority (Boylan, 2008). According to McClenney, annual planning at the Community College of Denver included procuring resources to support the college's mission of enabling students who are underprepared to be successful. These resources typically included a "focus on student success, diversity, professional development, and the appropriate uses of technology" (Boylan, 2008, p. 16). Aside from engaging the entire campus community in DE efforts, McClenney believed maintaining an open dialogue between exit standards for DE coursework and entry standards of college-level coursework was essential.

Christine McPhail, a former president at Cypress College, refuted any notions of fixing DE with a single solution (Saxon, 2013). Instead, McPhail focused on the following three features of leadership support: scalability, capacity, and culture. According to McPhail, an institution should consider specific DE course offerings based on the population of students served and offer more classes if needed. McPhail mentioned the importance of the instructor's role in the DE classroom (Saxon, 2013). She suggested that instructors write a teaching philosophy and consider creating rules of engagement to promote collaboration between the teacher and students. From a culture standpoint, there must be a commitment from the board of trustees and the president for DE to excel (McCabe, 2003).

Method

Research Design

For this study, a phenomenological research design explored the lived experiences of community college presidents regarding their perceptions of DE. Moustakas (1994) highlighted *intentionality* and *intuition* as two defining features of transcendental phenomenology. The research design and method served as an intentional effort to investigate community college presidents' perceptions of DE. The researcher's intuition was critical for identifying relevant themes related to the central research question. Data were primarily collected using semi-structured interviews in person that lasted approximately an hour.

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Site and Participant Selection

Eight presidents who currently lead community colleges in either North Carolina or Virginia were selected for the interview process. Five of the participants were presidents at a community college in North Carolina, and three of the participants were presidents at a community college in Virginia. After the participants' responses resulted in saturation of data, additional presidents did not need to be recruited to participate in the research process. A mixed method sampling approach was used in an effort to recruit a variety of individuals (Creswell, 2013). To recruit participants for the study, emails were sent to each participant explaining the research project, why their participation was particularly valuable, and if they would be willing to participate. Pseudonyms were used for both participants and the names of their institutions in an effort to protect identities and the colleges studied.

Data Analysis

Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam's methodology involving a systematic, researcher-based approach was utilized to analyze data. Transcribed interviews identified thematic clusters and connections. All of the participants' responses related to the core research questions in this study were identified and listed; erroneous responses were discounted. After themes related to the primary research questions were recognized, the researcher checked for direct responses from the participants related to the themes. Next, individual textual descriptions that include direct quotations from the participants' responses were identified. To accompany the textual descriptions, individual structural descriptions were constructed for each participant. Finally, both the textual and structural descriptions were combined to illuminate the study's themes.

Findings

Based on the data collected, the presidents viewed DE through the lens of an internal conflict. On the one hand, DE is valuable and necessary because all the community colleges in this study enroll students through open-door admissions policies, and there is a great need to help underprepared students. On the other hand, the presidents recognize difficult issues with DE in terms of student progression and student success. The relevant themes that emerged from the presidents' responses were viewing DE as an obstacle to student success, rethinking developmental education, and placing a greater emphasis on

student services. In addition, three additional themes were identified for supporting DE from a presidential standpoint. These themes were integrating DE into the student-success agenda, recognizing institutional benefits inherent within developmental education, and providing faculty support to DE instructors.

Perspectives of Community College Presidents

Viewing developmental education as an obstacle to student success. Many of the presidents in this study viewed DE as an obstacle due to a lack of student progression and low levels of student success. The presidents cited various reasons to support this view. One of the primary concerns pertained to how students progressed through DE coursework and whether or not they were successful in future college-level courses. According to the presidents, the level at which students are placed into a DE sequence affected their progression. Dr. Nelson stated, "If [students] started out in the lowest level developmental math or reading, [they] never went to a curriculum course." President Smith focused on the challenges that developmental math students face at ETCC. He mentioned, "It was impossible for anyone who was three levels of math down to ever graduate. If a student started that low, they would never graduate." Dr. Martin added that the lack of success for students in DE was "one of the biggest travesties that we are facing today."

A sense of frustration emerged from the presidents' responses based on the lack of student success in DE coursework. This unrest surrounding DE and its efficacy has had a profound impact on the political climate at the local, state, and national levels. Dr. Nelson revealed, "In this political climate right now, I believe [DE is] on its way out. I believe the whole idea is [to] eliminate the need for an individual to have developmental education." According to Dr. West, an alternative way to consider the rhetoric for eliminating the need for DE is by focusing on college readiness for students. However, a majority of the presidents did not use that phrasing. For instance, President Martin stated, "I take great pride in keeping as many people out of developmental education as we can. If they have the capacity to go on and succeed, then that's where they need to be." No matter the verbiage, most presidents believe that fewer students should place into DE.

Another reason the presidents consider DE a barrier to student success is the curriculum. In North Carolina and Virginia, presidents expressed dissatisfaction with the redesigned DE curriculum. President Holmes reflected on the lockstep arrangement of courses and noted the curriculum does not respond to individual students effectively. Both states altered course structures to modularize math and integrate reading and writing in English. The design of both course structures was to accelerate students through DE, but Dr. Richardson shared that the actual content of the courses and instructional methods remained unclear.

The heightened focus on student success in higher education and community colleges particularly has led to greater scrutiny of DE programs. President Richardson remarked, "With the emphasis on student success, DE has really been under the microscope because nationwide, the success rates of students who start in developmental ed [sic] are just appalling." The presidents expressed concern not only regarding students progressing through their DE prerequisites but also based on how the students who did complete DE performed in subsequent college-level courses. President Holmes stated, "[DE] becomes a bureaucratic quagmire for students, and it becomes almost an obstacle more than a springboard for success and completion." Dr. Holmes's comment encapsulates the feelings of most presidents in this study that DE, in its current and former configurations, impedes student success at least to some degree.

Rethinking developmental education. Although the presidents view DE as a barrier, they all feel it is important for community colleges. They shared many thoughts regarding reimagining DE in hopes of improving outcomes for students. Specifically, the presidents focused on the placement process, advising, course structures, and the overall organizational structure of DE.

The placement-testing process was a common concern for presidents. Dr. Smith expressed frustration with the placement test: "I've been disappointed with the people who wanted to cling to the old placement tests that we had even when it was proven that they didn't measure what they were supposed to measure." In Virginia, there is ongoing discussion at the presidential level about creating a multiple-measures-of-placement framework while in North Carolina, as of Fall of 2015, all 58 community colleges have implemented a state-mandated multiple-measures-for-placement framework.

Several of the presidents preferred DE to utilize different course models and structures on their campuses and statewide. At ETCC, President Smith remarked, "One of the things that we're doing is trying to get the students to be co-enrolled in something in their field of study, intro type courses, so they can see the connection between the developmental classes they're taking." Presidents Williams, Carter, and Nelson thought that DE courses, regardless of the structure, should individualize and personalize the experience for the students. More specifically, Dr. Nelson favored a course structure that gives students options and is either self-paced or taught within a learning community. At VCC, President Richardson supported implementing a co-requisite model pairing college-level and developmental courses simultaneously. Dr. Shaw indicated that a

contextualized learning-model for developmental studies at MCC would be ideal because that model could focus on experiential learning. At MCC, experiential learning entailed real-world application of content material for students in their classes. Lastly, Dr. Holmes mentioned, "I also think that a part of me feels that DE should be more optional. Students should have some self-selection on where they go." The presidents feel that the aforementioned course structures could provide students a more engaged, accessible, and flexible learning atmosphere.

Placing a greater emphasis on student services. For these presidents, a byproduct of focusing on student success and improving DE led to an increased awareness of the importance of student services. All colleges in this study offered students some type of academic support, usually in the form of peer or professional tutoring. When President West began his tenure at NGCC, one of his priorities was to enhance tutorial efforts. He revealed, "My goal was to elevate it, and make sure it was comprehensive so that students in a variety of areas could receive tutoring and that we promote it." Presidents Richardson and Carter both mentioned the desire to provide comprehensive academic support services including tutoring, a math center, a writing center, counseling, academic advising, and career advising. Other colleges have focused on making support more accessible. A defining feature of academic support at VCC is Structured Learning Assistance (SLA). The SLA courses at VCC focused on high-risk courses with substantial withdrawal and failure rates. These courses included additional academic support.

From a philosophical standpoint, Dr. Martin stated, "I think that our student services and student support necessary to succeed probably have to be a little more dramatic for DE students, and [we need to] hold those students accountable for taking advantage of it." At another college, NWCC hired professional tutors to work in the Learning Assistance Center according to President Nelson. She also created the Special Needs Advising Program (SNAP) designed to provide specialized assistance to students who placed into two or more DE courses. At MCC, President Shaw oversaw the addition of career coaches in the local high schools who specialized in career exploration and college readiness. She also recognized a growing need for advisors within the college to be equipped to work with students who may have mental or emotional issues. Again, the revamping of these various support services typically coincided with a rejuvenat-

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ed effort and focus on improving DE and student success in general.

Supporting Developmental Education From a Presidential Standpoint

Integrating developmental education into the student success agenda. The presidents in this study routinely referred to DE as a key factor in the overall student success agenda; however, the presidents also did not indicate that DE be singled out as an institutional priority. In most cases, each president did feel that DE was closely connected to or an integral part of the student-success mission. In fact, the first goal in the strategic plan of every college in this study was in one way or another directly related to student success.

Community colleges encounter a number of institutional priorities such as community relations and workforce development according to the presidents. However, President Richardson noted, "If we look at academic priorities, student success is clearly number one… Within that, I guess I would say developmental ed is either number one or right near the top." Other presidents described a similar viewpoint. Dr. Holmes said, "It's (developmental education) very much a part of the student success completion agenda which is number one of our strategic goals." President Carter added, "We exist because of our students and ensuring that they are successful is our number one priority." Both presidents of ETCC and UCC asserted that DE was important for the success of their students no matter the number of students involved.

All presidents interviewed in the study loosely defined student success as the completion of his or her goal, including a student's attainment of a degree, certificate, or successful transfer to a university. Most presidents acknowledged the inherent challenge of balancing this student success agenda with open enrollment policies. President Shaw commented:

> We'll take you all in, but then we don't promise them that we will exit them with success. The whole shift has occurred in community colleges not only to embrace this access mission but also now the comprehensive success mission, and I think that's where the tension is.

Due to the seemingly contradictory and bilateral missions that community colleges encounter, many presidents have implemented a variety of student success initiatives focused on not only the success of DE students but also all students served by their respective institutions. At ETCC, there is a

focus on using Completion by Design principles to guide the work of faculty and staff as conveyed by Dr. Smith. President Richardson created and led a Student Success Task Force focused on the mission of improving success for students, and consequently, DE is a focal point. At MCC, there is an emphasis on creating streamlined degree pathways for students: "As we are building these degree pathways, the developmental studies courses are embedded as the first foundation to move students up," according to President Shaw. Students in the MCC pathway are told exactly which courses to take in order to graduate or transfer, and any student who is required to take a developmental studies course must do so in the first semester.

President West described his opinion of DE as a cornerstone for student success and as a way to fulfill the community college mission:

> I think as an open-door institution we have to have DE. To be successful, we are going to admit students who are not yet ready for the totality of the college experience. And that goes right along with our mission, and if we are to succeed and hold them to high levels of achievement and high standards, then we have to have major support structures in place. So, developmental education is an integral part in my mind of what we do as a community college.

Every president in this study clearly emphasized DE as a potential and vital contributor to the overall mission of student success.

Recognizing institutional benefits. The presidents also described institutional benefits relative to giving priority to DE. According to President Holmes, the success of DE affects all areas of a campus environment including academic affairs and student services. In this way, DE can bridge gaps between programs, services, and individuals at the institutional level. President Nelson reflected, "I learned it's not in isolation that you can teach developmental education." According to the presidents, there is a necessary interconnectedness for DE to thrive and support student learning and progression.

President Shaw discussed an organizational mapping project at MCC that incorporated developmental studies and a revised assessment process for incoming students. She stated, "The premise behind the mapping is that it's our responsibility as the college to remove the bureaucratic barriers and the business barriers for our students so that they can focus on their college success." The college identified three cohorts of students. The first cohort was the pipeline student who recently graduated high school, is college ready, and possibly completed dual-enrollment courses while in high school. The second cohort was the adult learner who returned to college after entering the workforce for an extended period. The third cohort was the career switcher who decid-

ed to change careers. Regarding these cohorts, Dr. Shaw stated, "All are affected in some way by developmental studies, and assessment for all of these cohorts has to be different." At MCC, the adult learners and career switchers are typically required to take at least one DE course to build a foundation for future success.

Providing faculty support. The presidents supported DE by supporting faculty in a variety of ways. The presidents expressed concern regarding the high number of adjunct instructors used to teach developmental studies. To remedy that dilemma at CCC, Dr. Holmes declared, "I have supported a large number of instructors and replacement of those people when there has been change. Also trying to acknowledge that we have a challenge here in terms of our student population, and we need qualified instructors." Presidents Carter, Martin, and Nelson all mentioned the need for instructors to receive ongoing and high-quality PD focused on the stressors of teaching and techniques to overcome those challenges in the classroom to ensure a high level of competency and professionalism.

At ETCC, President Smith realized the value of his DE faculty: "As a general rule, I will tell you that developmental faculty tend to be very, very student-oriented. Very patient with students. That's not necessarily the trait of all your transfer faculty." At the same time, he anticipated that the need for DE instructors was going to decline at ETCC's campus due to placement-test changes. Therefore, Dr. Smith decided to support faculty through his actions. He used college funds to pay for any DE faculty member who did not have a Master's degree or a Master's degree and 18 graduate hours to return to school and earn that credential. The result of this PD was that high-quality faculty were retained and able to teach both DE and credit-bearing courses.

Discussion

This study provided participants an opportunity to reflect on their views regarding DE and best methods to support developmental studies both in principle and in practice. A discussion of the previously mentioned six themes along with supporting literature is provided.

Viewing Developmental Education as an Obstacle to Student Success

The findings suggesting that DE is an obstacle to student success is consistent with rhetoric from previous publications such as Complete College America (2012). Six of the eight presidents referred to DE as an obstacle. Consider the precarious political position that community college presidents find themselves in relation to DE and student success. To maintain financial support for their institutions, the presidents communicate regularly with state legislators and policymakers as well as various associations and state community-college boards. Multiple

politically-charged controversies surround DE, including the sole responsibility of community colleges to remediate students, the depletion of resources for other academic programs, and the concerns from legislators of state funds used to pay twice, essentially, for a student to learn the same academic skills. Therefore, community college presidents find themselves in a unique and precarious position. They must represent their campus externally and interact with political constituents who may not support or understand DE. At the same time, the institutions these presidents lead must continually accept academically underprepared students due to open-door admission standards.

Rethinking Developmental Education

Every president in this study indicated different approaches that institutions could take involving DE. These suggestions included changes to the placement and assessment process, a decentralized DE approach, different course models, and a redirection of students who were having trouble to more attainable goals. Emerging research supports the opinions of the presidents to rethink DE. For example, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2016) suggested a number of innovative practices for working with underprepared students. First, academic and career goals should be the focus of advising, and every entering student should meet with an advisor during initial stages of enrollment. Multiple measures of placement that gauge a student's academic history by considering high-school grade point average and performance on standardized tests may be more indicative of a student's capabilities than a placement test alone. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2016) also recommended identifying the types of support students might need to progress, especially through college-level gateway courses.

Placing a Greater Emphasis on Student Services

Six of the presidents in this study mentioned a renewed emphasis on student services coinciding with the redesign of DE and the greater emphasis nationally on the student-completion agenda. The primary form of academic support at the colleges reviewed included tutoring, counseling, and advising although some presidents highlighted other services such as career exploration for beginning students and case management for students with mental health issues. These findings are consistent with the literature that highlights a need for comprehensive support-services for DE (Boroch et al., 2010; Boylan,

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2002; Boylan & Saxon, 2012; Vick, Robles-Pina, Martiroysan, & Kite, 2015). The presidents who mentioned student services considered such means of support as being an integral component in developmental and college-level coursework.

Integrating Developmental Education Into the Student Success Agenda

Community-college presidents have a wide array of institutional priorities, including being involved in the community, creating a vision, representing the institution, and ensuring the effective operation of programs and services (Eddy, 2005). In terms of academic priorities, the first priority listed was student success in the strategic goals at every institution researched. Other collected documents, such as presidents' messages and updates to the campus, focused on student success but with a large-scale focus. Additionally, every president in this study verbalized during the interview process that DE was an important part of the overall student success agenda. Viewing DE as part of the student-success agenda gives the program a certain sense of priority, but this view contrasts the researched best practice that DE be a clearly stated institutional priority (Boroch et al., 2010; Boylan, 2002; Boylan & Saxon, 2012).

Recognizing Institutional Benefits

Five of the eight presidents believed there were institutional benefits associated with DE. At SPCC, several areas of the college were upgraded due to a more intense focus on helping DE students be successful. These services included advising, counseling, early alert, access to tutoring, and financial aid. Other presidents focused on the need for connectivity in DE for multiple programs to thrive. The six-step cyclical approach of the Community College Achievement Gap Model outlines a framework for identifying challenges, developing and implementing programs, and evaluating the effectiveness of those new initiatives (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Even though the presidents did not specifically mention the use of the Community College Achievement Gap Model, they clearly instituted a similar process in hopes of improving DE and benefitting other components of their institutions. Certainly, there are many campus-wide benefits for presidents who recognize the value of DE and seek to connect it throughout an institution.

Faculty Support

One way that the presidents gave priority to DE was through faculty support. Six of the eight presidents specifically mentioned supporting the developmental studies faculty on their campuses. Typically,

this support was in the form of providing PD, rehiring full-time instructor positions, and making resources available. The president might also support faculty by offering specific suggestions for connecting with students by suggesting that faculty provide students clear expectations and timely feedback (Saxon, 2013). Research also supports the need of hiring DE instructors who are passionate about teaching diverse populations (Boroch et al., 2010).

Implications for Practice

The community college presidents in this study viewed DE as both a barrier and a necessity. Such a contradiction leads to a number of implications for community college presidents. As a field, DE is scrutinized and often blamed for students' lack of progression through coursework. Therefore, it is important for administrators and faculty to monitor the progression of students in DE and college-level courses very carefully.

One practical recommendation is for DE personnel to communicate with their college president. The presidents in this study were open and willing to discuss DE challenges, potential improvements, and the important role of DE in fulfilling the community college mission to enroll diverse student populations. The presidents who mentioned their DE faculty spoke very highly of their abilities as instructors, and all of the presidents had a clear understanding of the foundational purpose of DE in preparing students for future success. Some faculty members may be hesitant to communicate with their presidents due to the organizational structure and the nature of their institutions, but the presidents in this study were supportive of their faculty and understood their value to the college. Ongoing communication between developmental studies faculty and the president should be encouraged.

The president can also make a concerted effort to connect with DE faculty. Actions as simple as visiting the faculty in their offices or occasionally stopping by their classes would signal that DE is a priority and that faculty are supported. Based on feedback from the presidents in this study, other forms of faculty support are to provide PD and rehire faculty for full-time positions as needed. In addition, the president could specifically publicize the success of DE instructors in a college report or communicate the need for DE both internally and externally.

Although most presidents in this study consider DE to be an important part of the overall student success agenda on their campuses, it may be more advantageous to clearly state that DE is an institutional priority. Clearly stating DE as a priority is a research-based best practice (Boylan, 2002; Boylan & Saxon, 2012). The exact language could be tailored to each individual institution and may mention assisting academically underprepared students or transforming the abilities of students. Doing so would

not show favoritism to DE. On the contrary, focusing on DE would strengthen the overall student-success goal of a college by making the point that students, regardless of their current skill-level, could achieve their goals. After all, the presidents in this study revealed many institutional benefits when DE is given a high priority.

Community-college leaders should continue to be involved in discussions for ways to improve DE, college readiness efforts, and placement procedures. For DE especially, it may be useful for the president to consider student demographics and institutional culture. On an institutional level, presidents can emphasize the important role of student services by making the services comprehensible, visible, and accessible. Presidents should also evaluate the positives and negatives of having a decentralized developmental studies program versus a centralized department. A centralized department houses all DE programs and services and is led by a department chair in most cases. A decentralized program has DE faculty integrated into other departments on campus such as math and English. Research and opinions vary regarding which format is most beneficial, so it will be important for presidents to have a thorough understanding of the institutional culture, student demographics, and available resources. To make this decision, the presidents will also need to consider the strengths and limitations of their DE faculty and support personnel. A similar framework can assist the presidents and executive staffs in determining the ongoing effectiveness of the DE redesign and any additional changes.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are several suggestions for future research related to this study. For instance, future research could recreate this study focused on the perceptions of DE based on other individuals within a community college setting. Depending on the institution, the organization of DE varies, so there are number of possible positions to investigate such as vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and developmental studies instructors. These faculty, staff, and administrators would likely have interesting opinions that could contribute to the conversation surrounding DE. With the faculty, in particular, those individuals who teach developmental math, developmental English, and study skills could discuss the challenges of teaching regarding redesigned curriculum and reflect on how leadership supported the change on their campus. A similar study might also investigate community college presidents outside of North Carolina and Virginia.

The presidents or chancellors of state systems may also provide a compelling perspective regarding DE. Although policymakers might have limited knowledge and experience with DE, it would be interesting to hear their thoughts as to why they think

DE is ineffective or beneficial. Another way to recreate this study with any of the previously mentioned positions and community college presidents is to use quantitative measures. A Likert-scale survey could assess similar topics of interest for a large number of individuals at regional, state, or even national levels.

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