
Redefining ready: Connecting adolescent development to college readiness

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Using a developmental approach:

Using a developmental approach is often as much about *how* you approach your work as about *what* you do. A developmental approach can and should influence how you interact with students during all events, activities, and one-on-one interactions. The following strategies can be used to support students' college-going identities, motivational beliefs, and self-regulatory skills.

Identity

1. Integrate discussions of identity into classroom assignments
2. Watch for practices and policies that undermine the development of self-efficacy
3. Invite students to discuss how they perceive their own ability

Motivation

1. Use language that emphasizes effort rather than innate talent
2. Emphasize learning rather than proving ability or getting accolades
3. Help students understand the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for doing things, and strike a balance
4. Provide students with a range of reasons for going to college and generate discussions that widen the list of reasons

Self-regulation

1. Provide a balance of support and opportunities for autonomy
2. Guide students to break long-term goals into sub-goals
3. Help students use mental contrasting (e.g., using "if-then" statements to identify and plan for potential obstacles)
4. Build reflection into assignments and instructional practices

IDENTITY

Key Concepts:

Self-concept; self-efficacy;
multiple dimensions of identity;
possible selves

MOTIVATION

Key Concepts:

Belief systems (fixed and growth mindsets); goal types (extrinsic, intrinsic, and internalized regulation)

SELF-REGULATION

Key Concepts:

Agency; delay of gratification;
mental contrasting; meta-cognition

The ideas and strategies presented here have been excerpted from *Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success* (Harvard Education Press, 2012).

Eduardo's story

Ever since he could remember, Eduardo and everyone around him had assumed he would go to college. His parents, who had emigrated to the U.S. from Mexico shortly before he was born, told him that college was the route to “a good life” with more income, and that “after you go to college, things will be easier for you than they have been for us.” They usually didn’t have time to attend school meetings and events, and their limited English discouraged them for talking to Eduardo’s teachers, but they made sure Eduardo had time and space to study at home, sat with him to check his grades on the school’s online grading system, and asked friends from church to help them understand how to help him get financial aid for college.

Eduardo worked hard to meet his parents’ expectations, getting into an exam entrance public high school earning A’s and B’s in his classes, even after he started working evening shifts at a fast food restaurant and some of his friends starting cutting class. He told his best friend, “I can’t let my parents down. My education means everything to them.”

It wasn’t surprising that his teachers praised his efforts and grades, telling him “You have a great foundation for college,” and “this GPA will look great on your applications.” In middle school, Eduardo began participating in GEAR UP activities and developed strong relationships with both his GEAR UP advisor, Ms. Randolph, and one of the tutors who came to his school, Jared. He attended GEAR UP activities through middle school and into high school, although he did not participate in the GEAR UP summer program because of his desire to work and save money. “You’re really on your way, aren’t you?” his school guidance counselor asked as he started junior year of high school.

But as the spring of his junior year approached, Eduardo’s progress on the path to college slowed. He missed the deadline to register for the first round of SAT testing, despite several reminders from Ms. Randolph, and he skipped the campus visit sponsored by the program. In May, Ms. Randolph sat down with him to discuss his plans. Eduardo had heard the names of the colleges she suggested before, and he knew how to apply. But something was getting in the way of him actually taking the steps. What was it?

“Let’s take a step back, Eduardo. Why do you want to college?” Ms. Randolph asked. Shrugging, he responded, “You know. I’ll make more money. It will make my parents happy. Isn’t that what everyone thinks I should do?” Ms. Randolph paused to see if he had more to say. He did. “It’s just... I don’t know. I know I can do it, but... none of my friends or siblings have gone to college. What if I don’t like it? What if it isn’t right for me?”

Questions for discussion

1. Eduardo has the academic credentials and the knowledge to get into college. What are the factors that are holding him back?
2. How might Eduardo's reasons for going to college help him, and how might they limit him?
3. What could Ms. Randolph do to help Eduardo internalize the college-going goal and see himself as a college-goer?
4. Eduardo's parents are clearly engaged and invested in his education. What could Ms. Randolph do to further support their engagement?
5. What kinds of data or benchmark indicators could Ms. Randolph have used before the spring of Eduardo's junior year to identify both his assets and potential challenges on the road to college?