

Katie Hern

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My Story



"When I realized that the structure of developmental education courses was actually harming my students and were really deeply inequitable and racist, my commitment to change the structure for them kicked in."

For Dr. Katie Hern, an unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that she gets to see the amazing kindness, empathy, and praise her daughter's primary school teachers put into interacting with their students online.

This style of teaching mirrors her own. Since the pandemic, she has been thinking about, and practicing, a humanity-centered teaching approach. Now, when starting her online English composition courses at Skyline College, she checks in with students to see how they are doing. She finds that deliberately caring about her students as people makes much needed space for learning in this new online environment.

Taking a growth-centered approach

Hern's humanistic, growth-centered approach to teaching also describes her own journey. She readily talks about how much she has grown and learned over her tenure as a teacher, and how her teaching style now better serves her students. She sums up her approach by saying, "If students don't do well, it's not a sign that they can't do something. It's a sign that my class is not achieving my goals as a teacher. It's my responsibility to keep studying and adjusting until I get as many students as I humanly can to learn and be successful."

Laying the foundation for change

Hern became interested in developmental education reform because she wanted to help others understand that the system was structurally guaranteed to fail students because "every developmental course in the student's path makes them less likely to actually make progress in college."

"Even though we intended the developmental courses to help students be more successful...we actually guaranteed that fewer of them would make it into the next levels of classes."

In 2010, she co-founded the [California Acceleration Project \(CAP\)](#) with her colleague, Myra Snell, and they went on the road giving workshops on developmental education reform to California's community colleges and around the United States. At the time, Dr. Hern was teaching open access accelerated development courses at Chabot College, and it was considered an innovative approach. By 2015, the data pointed them in the direction of new strategies

“We came to understand that the placement process is the problem. A lot of these students aren’t underprepared—it was our testing that’s the issue, not them. And we learned how corequisites are a much better way of supporting students who need extra help.”

Changing policy and transforming the system

Hern’s work with CAP moved from grassroots workshops to the state policy level when she came up against faculty and administrators who didn’t want to change their course structure—despite clear evidence that the reforms advanced student success. In collaboration with other organizations, CAP helped pass [California Assembly Bill 705](#) in 2017. The bill required community colleges to maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete college-level gateway courses that meet transfer requirements in English composition and quantitative reasoning within one year.

As a result of the legislation, institutions drastically reduced their stand-alone developmental courses and increased their offerings of corequisite courses. Completion rates in mathematics and English have doubled since fall 2015. To date, [statewide research](#) shows that every demographic group that was examined benefits from these changes, including all racial and ethnic groups, students with all ranges of high school GPAs, students with less high school math preparation, non-native English speakers who graduated from a U.S. high school, and students with disabilities.

Using the power of legislation

Moving forward, Hern’s advice to other states interested in developmental education reform is to use the power of legislation. “Policy reform is the way to get these changes at scale and give the best possible benefits to students,” she said. “It’s not time to pilot anymore. The evidence is so unequivocal at this point that not to act upon it just feels willfully negligent.”

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