Book Review: Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success

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Book Review:
Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success

Reviewed by Christie Fox (*Utah System of Higher Education*)

I first heard of Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne M. Bouffard's *Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success* during one of the Department of Education's College Access Affinity calls. Greg Darnieder, Special Assistant to the Secretary for College Access said, "I read this book, and then I read it again." It was enough to make me take notice.

It is easy to see why Darnieder was so taken with the book as it outlines in clear, accessible language what college access providers can do to improve their practices and programs. The book could be useful for practitioners at every level; indeed, my office used it as professional development training to get everyone thinking about the practical aspect of our work, which so often remains in the abstract.

This book seeks to answer the question posed by many involved in college access programs: "I have a great program, so why am I not reaching the right students?" The answer, according to Savitz-Romer and Bouffard, concerns taking into account the social, cognitive, and emotional development of the targeted students. The authors call for a "paradigm shift" in how we approach college access (p. 38). They want to change the way we work, emphasizing the right message to students at the right time, based on their physical and emotional development.

The authors take the readers through what it means to become "developmentally aware" and how to apply that to a program (p. 41). Once practitioners understand what is happening emotionally and cognitively, they can start to understand the choices that students are making. A book that stresses students' cognitive development may be at risk for being too technical for the average practitioner. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard avoid this by including stories from their own work and that of their colleagues. The reader learns about students who chose to participate in college-ready activities as well as from those who didn't—and why.

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People who run college access programs notice immediately that the students most likely to sign up for the programs are the ones who are already planning on going to college. That is, they have made up their minds that college is for them and now they want to do whatever they need to do to get there. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard argue that is because most of our college outreach programs come too late in the students' developmental stage or because practitioners unwittingly say and do things to undermine students' decision-making. They argue that students should be "active agents" in the process and adults actually harm the process by doing too much. They note "unfortunately, it has been common to view college preparation as something that is done to and for young people rather than with them as active contributors" (p. 48). Similarly, some practitioners are so organized and accomplished at creating the organizational structure for the college application process that students go through the process without any real engagement, and never find the need to develop organizational skills themselves. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard compare these well-meaning professionals to "helicopter parents" who do too much for their children (p. 162). They then offer ideas on how to help students develop those skills on their own.

In addition to such practical advice, I found that the book offered two meaningful structures to better understand and improve college access programming. The first has to do with helping students develop a "college-going identity," so popular in outreach, especially to the middle grades. The authors translate James Marcia's four identity statuses to the idea of creating a college-going culture. Students may be:

- Identity diffused, and not yet resolved whether or not they are college-going;
- Foreclosured, by "prematurely" deciding college is not for them;
- In a moratorium, "trying on the possibility of going to college"; or
- Identity achieved, having explored the options, talked to peers and others, and on the path to college (p. 70-71).

Savitz-Romer and Bouffard then go on to explain how the students that we interact with might be in each stage and what the appropriate approach to each of them might be. Does this make more work for college access professionals? Yes. But it also stands to make our work more meaningful and effective.

Another useful explanation and template for practical use is the authors' section on scaffolding. I am used to thinking about scaffolding in regards to undergraduate curricula and skill building. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard apply this idea to how practitioners can help their students achieve college readiness in order to make their interventions more effective and to help students achieve what we know are the important non-

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cognitive skills and habits of mind necessary for college persistence and success.

Because they are targeting their message to the largest group of people and trying to reach both practitioners and research, some of what Savitz-Romer and Bouffard suggest is well-trod ground. They remind readers that under-represented students are more likely to go to college if they see role models who look like them. The research first noted this many years ago, and hopefully practitioners and researchers have taken this to heart. There are a number of instances like this, especially in the second half of the book.

My other complaint with the book is that many of their recommended practices rely on expensive one-on-one mentoring. The recommendations in the "envisioning" chapter in particular require that the mentor have the time and ability to know each individual student well and have earned their trust, a practice that is sure to lead to greater results but which is not always possible when we're relying on a shifting undergraduate population to serve as "near-peer" mentors or on grant funding that limits our time and staffing models.

Nonetheless, this book has something to offer nearly everyone who is working on or interested in college access. It is the kind of book that practitioners can read once (in defiance of Greg Darnieder's advice) and then reach for again and again as they devise and

revise their interventions and think about how best to reach their students at this particular time in their lives. JCA