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# REMEDIAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN ENGLISH STUDENTS: DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

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This report is an analysis of the characteristics found among students in remedial, freshman English classes at a large, mid-south, regional university. At the end of the 1977 Spring Semester, 187 students from 13 remedial, freshman English classes were analyzed in terms of ability, motivation to attend classes and career choice (declared or undeclared majors). These variables were analyzed and compared to achievement levels (grades).

The subjects in this study were students enrolled in remedial freshman composition classes (designed for students with weak backgrounds in English composition). Students were placed in these special, remedial classes on the recommendation of their instructors while attending a regular English composition class. Early in the semester, regular freshman English composition instructors determine from writing samples that some of their students do not have an understanding of English basics. Those students, identified as being underdeveloped, are transferred to remedial sections of English composition. The remedial sections stress grammar, punctuation and spelling as well as theme writing. The regular English composition classes place more emphasis upon theme writing.

Students receive credit for taking the remedial course, and are allowed to take up to three semesters to complete the required work. The reason for allowing students to take up to three semesters to complete the remedial course is due to the additional time required to master basic concepts of grammar, punctuation and spelling along with theme writing. Remedial students are allowed to repeat any work that does not measure up to a C grade. Students attending the remedial English classes are definitely underachieving in the area of English composition, and they quite possibly have characteristics resembling the academic underdeveloped student population in general. A brief review of the research concerning the underachieving student population will be presented.

## *Review of Research*

Research conducted with college students indicates that academic achievement relates to measured or demonstrated ability and other non-intellectual traits such as self-image, interest or motivation and attaining a sense of control (Coleman, et al., 1966). Successful students tend to plan

their work carefully, think ahead, are conscientious, independent, self-confident and recognize the importance of finding suitable conditions for effective study (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1970). Students in remedial college classes can be described as underachieving due to the lack of ability or some other factor such as motivation. The combination of motivation and ability are thought to be significant factors accounting for academic success, yet it is difficult to explain the interaction of these factors.

During the past 30 years there have been attempts to isolate the causal determinants of over and underachievement. Such variables as inadequate motivation, lack of defined goals, emotional instability, bilingualism in the home, specific intellectual disability, poor study habits, the sex role and susceptibility to boredom have been investigated. Sattler and Neuringer (1965) did a literature review on over and underachievement and found there are no marked trends except for value orientations toward academic success (motivational factors). Overachievers seem to be motivated toward academic success and underachievers are not. Atkinson and Raynor (1974) found that underachievers are underachieving due to motivational problems, and that ability and motivation interact to account for different achievement levels.

Underachieving students tend to be hostile toward parents and associated authority figures (Golburgh and Penney, 1962). Research indicates underachieving students to be insecure, dependent, immature and unable to form warm interpersonal relationships (Powell and Jourard, 1963). Bednar and Weinberg (1970) cited research studies that identified underachievers as being emotionally immature, negative toward authority with limited reading skills and poor study habits. Underachievers are characterized by withdrawal behavior and by less social, work-oriented interaction with peers (Perkins, 1965), and they have negative self-concepts (Shaw, et al., 1960). Maxwell (1971) and Kornrich (1965) suggested that underachievers are self-deprecatory, lack a clear system of goals and values, are vulnerable to disparagement by others, have immature relations with parents, lack insight into their problems and are likely to be anxious and depressed. Evans and Anderson (1973) found that underachievement was related to values and experiences associated with the culture of poverty, specifically low self-concepts of ability, fatalistic, present-time orientation and non-democratic child rearing experiences. Wandowski (1973) found the successful student to be phlegmatic, relatively independent and versatile, unruffled by demands or pressures, and tolerant, though not uncritical of his tutors and peers.

Morgan (1952) found overachievers to be more mature, serious, aware of others, dominant, self-confident and had a motivation to achieve. Underachievers were identified by negativism, less interest in reading, withdrawal from competition, high on the delinquency scale and less interest in academic motivation.

Astin (1964) conducted an interesting study with 6,660 high aptitude college students over a four year period and found that students who drop out of college come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have lower

ranks in high school, plan initially to get lower college degrees, and apply for relatively fewer scholarships than do students who do not drop out. When considering personality measures, it was suggested that dropouts tend to be more aloof, self-centered, impulsive, and assertive than non-dropouts (Astin, 1964). Grace (1957), using a personality inventory (the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory—MMPI), indicated that dropouts tend to be more irresponsible and dependent than students who remain in college. Holland and Astin (1962) investigated traits of talented students and found that academic achievement is related to self-control, persistence, socialization and super-ego strength (self-judgmental functions).

Remedial college students most likely will have characteristics similar to the underachieving student. These students will probably be low in measured ability, relatively hostile or negative and unmotivated to accomplish academic tasks. Brown, et al. (1954) found that the low achieving college student is characterized by a lack of decisiveness of action, a tendency to procrastinate and an unwillingness to conform to academic requirements and routine regulations.

Based on the review of research, remedial freshman English students will be analyzed in terms of ability, motivation to attend classes and career choice. It is likely that successful remedial students will have relatively high ability scores, high class attendance rates and will have a declared major. Having a declared major relates to decisiveness of action. Class attendance relates to a willingness to engage in academic activities (motivation), and ability relates to academic potential. The successful remedial students (those who progress) should be motivated to attend classes, relatively high in ability and have a declared major (decisive).

#### *Observed Student Characteristics*

Of the 187 remedial, freshman English students, 133 (71%) were males and 54 (29%) were females. Compared to the entire freshman class, males are over represented in the remedial, freshman English classes (Table 1).

TABLE 1  
Comparison of Remedial Freshman English Population  
to the Entire Male-Female Population in the  
Freshman Class (Spring Semester 1977)

	Remedial Classes	Freshman Class
Males	133 (71%)	2,297 (49%)
Females	54 (29%)	2,433 (51%)
Total	187	4,730

Seventy-one percent of the freshman, remedial English class population are males compared to 49% of the entire freshman class. [It has been reported by the Census Bureau that women now outnumber men among university undergraduates (*Phi Delta Kappan*, 1977).] This finding supports the research of Todd, et al. (1962) and Gelso and Rowell (1967) who found that underachievement is much more a characteristic of males than females.

It was decided to compare successful remedial students to unsuccessful remedial students on the dimensions of ability, motivation to attend classes and decisiveness (declared career choice). It has been hypothesized that the successful remedial students would have relatively high ability scores, high class attendance rates and would have a declared major. Successful students are defined as those who complete the remedial composition class with a grade of C or better. An examination of the characteristics of those students earning grades A through F (failure) will also be made. From this analysis it may become apparent that successful remedial students have traits that distinguish them from the unsuccessful students, and these characteristics may be the same ones that distinguish achieving students from underachievers.

Table 2 indicates that successful students are slightly above unsuccessful students regarding ability. It has been found in previous research that the greatest gains in academic achievement with remedial students were produced by persons with relatively high ability (Pressey, 1928; Maxwell, 1963; Lee, 1964; and Tresselt, 1966). On the variable of attendance, successful students attend class a bit more than half the time (55%) compared to 40.8% for unsuccessful students. There are slightly more successful students with declared majors than unsuccessful students. This analysis generally supports our hypothesis, although the relationships are rather weak.

TABLE 2  
An Analysis of Successful and Unsuccessful Students  
in Remedial Freshman English (N = 187)

	Successful Students (C grade or better)	Unsuccessful Students (D, F or retain for another semester)
ACT Composite*	11.37 (37)	11.61 (111)
Percent Attendance	55% (45)	40.8 % (142)
Percent with Declared Major	86.6 % (45)	81.4 % (142)

\* 148 students completed the ACT.

TABLE 3  
 An Analysis of Remedial Freshman English Students  
 by Academic Achievement (N = 187)

Achievement (Grade Earned)	A	B	C	D	F	Retained
ACT Composite*	0	12.09 (11)	11.58 (26)	0	12.76 (21)	11.36 (90)
Percent Attendance	0	49.9% (17)	58.1% (28)	51.4% (1)	12.4% (26)	47.1% (115)
Percent with Declared Major	0	82% (17)	89% (28)	100% (1)	84% (26)	80.5% (115)

\*148 students completed the ACT

Table 3 indicates that ability is not in a direct relationship with grades. In fact, it is surprising to notice that the highest ability grouping were the failing students. This may be explained by looking at the class attendance rates. The failing students, although having the highest ability scores, had an extremely low attendance rate (12.4%). If attendance can be thought to be related to academic motivation, then the failing students are considerably below average regarding academic motivation. Classroom attendance may be a reactive measure of academic motivation. Attendance rates were greatest for the C students. It is surprising to note that there is little difference between B students and C students. In fact C students had better attendance rates, and there were more C students with declared majors than B students. These two characteristics, better attendance rates (motivation) and more declared majors (decisiveness), may have been critical traits which helped C students compensate for their relatively low ability scores. In regard to declared major, there was little difference between student achievement groupings. This analysis does not support our hypothesis, since the results do not represent linear relationships regarding achievement (grades), the dependent variable, and the independent variables of ability, motivation and career choice. Weiner (1972) said it is likely that low ability students generally perform poorly, regardless of motivational factors.

It is apparent a more generalized type of grouping between successful and unsuccessful students tend to conform to the findings of previous research, although the relationships are extremely weak. However, this particular population has extremely low ability scores and relatively low academic motivation, as demonstrated by class attendance rates. It may be that a homogeneous, low ability student grouping is more erratic when considering the variables of ability, motivation and career choice, as related

to achievement levels. When considering ability and motivation, it is quite obvious that the failing students were not motivated to achieve, although their ability scores were slightly higher than the successful students. The relationship between ability and motivation to attend classes demonstrates that both factors are quite important.

Although it has been suggested that persons who know their objectives are better students (Brown, et al., 1954; Weitz, 1955; Shuman, 1956; Todd, et al., 1962; Kornrich, 1965; Whiteley and Hummel, 1965; and Maxwell, 1971), this was not demonstrated conclusively with a low ability grouping as measured by declared major. A more accurate accounting of student objectives might be made by using an interview technique or a personality inventory.

### *Conclusions*

It is apparent that a homogeneous, low ability student grouping is more erratic when attempting to relate to the research evidence (which used heterogeneous ability groupings). Although the general classifications of successful and unsuccessful students did tend to relate to previous research, a more careful inspection of achievement (grades) produced mixed results.

Low ability students apparently do not have much motivation to attend remedial English classes, as indicated by the extremely low attendance rates. This may be generalized to other remedial classes. Lesnik (1972) said that lack of motivation is expressed in some form of resistance to becoming involved in studies—class attendance represents involvement. This research tends to support the contention that low ability students generally perform poorly, regardless of motivational factors (Weiner, 1972).

Remedial English teachers should be concerned with the problems of motivation when attempting to deal with low ability students. This seems to be a major problem. It was apparent from this study that when students collectively attended classes about half the time, they passed the course (Tables 2 and 3). The lowest attendance rate (12.4%) was found among the failing students.

Methods which address emotional and motivational problems should be emphasized by remedial English teachers. This is a most difficult area to promote and work with; however, it seems to be critical in terms of engaging the low ability student.

English teachers attempting to deal with the remedial, low ability groupings need to be aware of the unique problems these students have. Remedial students have a double problem in that their potential to achieve is low (measured ability) and the motivation to engage in academic activity is diminished. These low ability students, more than likely, have problems with self-esteem which related to motivation. As the research indicates, underachievers are self-deprecatory, lack a clear system of goals and values, are vulnerable to disparagement by others, have immature relations with parents, lack insight into their problems and are likely to be anxious and depressed (Kornrich, 1965 and Maxwell, 1971). Remedial English teachers have more to deal with than just teaching grammar, punctuation, spelling and theme writing.

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