

Matt DelConte

By: Joshua Abreu
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Personal Story

After 12 years of teaching English and Writing, Dr. Matt DelConte became the Project Director of the State University of New York (SUNY) Developmental English Learning Community, a statewide initiative led by Onondaga Community College (OCC), where he is also an Associate Professor of English. As Project Director, he helps campuses across New York implement a corequisite model, such as The Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), in which students can take developmental writing and college-level courses in the same semester with the same instructor.

One of Dr. DelConte's goals is to help instructors develop teaching practices that are responsive to their students. Dr. DelConte believes instructors' success in the classroom is dependent on their ability to adapt their teaching to the non-academic factors that can negatively impact student success. He finds this holistic approach to student success can be a challenge for faculty. Some may believe that they should not get involved in their students' personal lives. However, Dr. DelConte believes that not recognizing the complexity of students' lives can "ignore the humanity of who we are" and impede progress in the classroom.

While Dr. DelConte is optimistic about the impact of the corequisite model on student success, he recognizes that there are challenges to responding to students holistically. Students experience issues with family, health, and finances that can impact their academic success, which he says can "very reasonably overshadow essay two due on Wednesday." Additionally, he has come to learn that many of his students have had bad experiences with formal education, which can make it challenging to change students' ideas about learning in a school setting.

The corequisite model at OCC, however, has helped establish a space where students can learn and succeed. Dr. DelConte believes the corequisite model has helped students "have positive experiences early" in their college education as well as expand students' connection with the faculty. Additionally, the small cohort of 10 students per developmental course allows them to develop close relationships with classmates, which can contribute to students' sense of connection to their academics.

Since implementing the corequisite model, pass rates for development writing have increased by 20%, and first-year composition completion rates for students in developmental writing have more than doubled. While Dr. DelConte celebrates these improvements, he also acknowledges pass rates were very low before the corequisite model. He hopes to build off the early success to make further improvements.

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Policy-Related Overview

Dr. DelConte said the OCC administration has done a good job at being reflective and examining how the OCC faculty and administrators may or may not be helping students succeed in the classroom. This self-reflective approach has led OCC administrators and faculty to build on the current corequisite model with trauma-informed teaching practices. As described by Dr. DelConte, many OCC students have experienced trauma in many different forms, which can significantly impact students in negative ways. Instructors may jeopardize opportunities to help students succeed academically if they are unaware of it or are “unprepared to deal with it.”

To optimize learning opportunities for students, Dr. DelConte focuses on ways to improve the effectiveness of faculty instruction such as examining the retention and graduation rates of students to understand the impact of corequisite courses. Other ways are more practical such as implementing statewide professional development workshops, which he says has helped instructors reflect on and adopt effective teaching practices.

As Dr. DelConte continues to improve the corequisite model, his colleagues in the English department are exploring ways to expand the model across the campus. They envision a structure that will provide all students with the support they receive in a corequisite model without requiring them to take a developmental course at all. This, he suggests, is an extension of a corequisite mindset: remove the barriers that often surface when we require students to take developmental education.

Dr. DelConte believes OCC’s corequisite model for English and other subjects can provide students with a more supportive learning environment than their previous schooling experiences. He hopes instructors can mitigate students’ “shame” relating to their academic challenges and ensure that such challenges are not “fatalistic” for students’ academic success.

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