

Mari Watanabe

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Personal Story

Dr. Watanabe has been in the CUNY system for almost 10 years, but her story begins outside of higher education with a background that has been surprisingly useful to her work in developmental education redesign, particularly co-requisite redesign. Mari's early professional training and career were in the field of behavioral psychology in which she worked primarily in clinical settings. She came to CUNY as a post-doctoral fellow and during her time at CUNY has held a variety of positions and participated in a number of research projects. In 2013, she and her research partners implemented a seminal research study assessing the effectiveness of an intervention in developmental education that later became known as co-requisite remediation. As she said, "Right now, co-req is becoming increasingly prevalent but back then it was relatively new and didn't even have that name... When we began the study, we had no idea what the outcomes would be. But we've been pleasantly surprised over time to see strong positive outcomes at every step of the way, from pass rates in dev[elopmental] ed[ucation], to gateway course completion, and now in the graduation rates of those students we began studying in 2013."

When we asked Mari to reflect on her personal trajectory and what she's learned along the way, she focused on the relevance of her background outside of higher education. As she told us, "When I think about what we've accomplished and all we have underway now around co-req, I feel really fortunate to have a background in behavioral psychology. The versatility of behavioral psychology was always clear to me, but it's been really interesting to see its applicability to understanding and managing the change process involved in co-req redesign."

As she reflected on the relevance of a seemingly unrelated field of study and practice, Mari focused on how difficult the shift to the co-requisite model can be for faculty and how often that difficulty can manifest as extreme discomfort. Mari's background has allowed her to understand how humans respond to change – and that understanding has helped her to work more effectively and collaboratively with faculty amid the discomforts of change. "I always try to approach people by learning first about their work, by listening to and learning from them, and by building collegial relationships that honor the expertise of faculty." Approaching the work in this way has allowed Mari to begin to forge relationships in which campus leaders feel comfortable enough to put voice to concerns and challenges that system/campus power dynamics typically make candidness difficult.

Policy-Related Overview

Mounting evidence from around the country shows that many more students are able to succeed if remediation is provided as an integrated support. Rather than providing remediation through separate pre-requisite courses aimed at preparing students for a credit-bearing course, co-requisite models place students directly into credit-bearing courses while offering remediation at the same time. States and institutions are testing several models of co-requisite remediation, and CUNY is not different. They distributed guidance to colleges as they developed their co-requisite courses. The results are impressive, with many institutions seeing double and even triple the rates of success in gateway courses under the new model. While the work entailed in designing and implementing co-requisite remediation is significant and difficult, the results are compelling by any standard. Momentum around co-requisite remediation is growing around the country, with more and more institutions rolling up their sleeves to make these changes on behalf of better and more equitable outcomes for their students.

Since 2016, CUNY has been working to scale co-requisite redesign across the system and the learning has been tremendous. Mari noted: “We used to think co-req was more about departments, but that’s not it. It’s more and more apparent co-req is about institutional change. The cross-sectional collaboration required for co-req makes this very complicated.”

When we asked Mari to reflect on what she’s been most proud of in the accomplishments, she focused on the value of the math & English Summits she and her team at the system office have designed for practitioners to really grapple with the complexity of co-requisite redesign. She expressed commitment and pride around working collegially and collaboratively with the colleges to help them improve and accelerate their work on behalf of better outcomes for students.

Citation:

Kadlec, A. (2019, April). Mari Watanbe (People in the Reform series). Denver, CO: Strong Start to Finish, Education Commission of the States.