Tim Littell, Associate Vice Provost of Student Success at Wright State University, has a long history with developmental education reform – a history that began because of his eclectic background in engineering and counseling. In the 1990’s, in the early days of developmental education reform, Tim got a call from a friend at a community college who asked if he’d be willing to teach developmental math. He told her that he wasn’t qualified to teach math because he’s an engineer not a mathematician. She responded by clarifying that it was his background in counseling, not math, that was appealing.

Tim quickly moved from teaching developmental math to overseeing developmental education departments, and it was then that he started looking at and using data in conversations with faculty. This turn toward data to challenge assumptions about student failure cracked open conversations that changed everything. “We learned a lot about what not to do at the time. We discovered that, no, making students take two years of developmental math and developmental writing is not the answer, and we will have more success if we stop doing that.”

While that early breakthrough compelled colleges to innovate, Tim cites the funding model when talking about the deeper drivers of change. “In the old days, if students were sitting in the seats in the fall quarter on the 15th day, that pays your bills for the year. We didn’t care if they were here on the 16th day, or if they graduated for that matter. Now, of course, that’s not true. We did care, but it was only when the funding model and incentives changed that we got truly serious because now resources were aligned with priorities.”
Policy-Related Overview

Wright State, an access-oriented public university in southwestern Ohio serving more than 15,000 students, has been engaged in developmental education reform since 2012. The work started in English where Tim began by embedding a director of developmental writing within the English department as teaching faculty. This quietly challenged the longstanding, and ongoing, practice of keeping developmental education in its own silo. From there, the work in English took off and was scaled. As is often the case, the challenges were greater with math than in English. In accounting for what helped to accelerate progress in the redesign of developmental math, Tim focused again on getting the right people in the right spot to get the work done. A change in leadership in the math department that solidified the shared sense of purpose unlocked the work there.

The truth is, we always had the expertise and we always had the resources to do it. What we didn’t have was the commitment to shared goals... That, I think, is the secret sauce for Wright State – it was the commitment to the working relationships that made the difference. To me, once you’re committed to those working relationships, you can do all sorts of things. You can weather the hard times, you can mess up and have grace with one another, but if you’re not committed to the relationships, it doesn’t work.

In addition to talking at length about the way in which relationships make or break the work, Tim also focused on the vital importance of providing clear expectations and sufficient support to faculty and staff, especially the unwilling.

We learned quickly that we needed to provide a clear expectation and a clear structure for everyone involved. If we don’t do that, then it creates conflict, and a lot of times faculty are resistant not because they don’t want it to work but because they don’t feel that they have the tools to do something they’ve never done before.

For many faculty, for example, the scaling of co-requisite remediation means they are seeing students sooner, many of whom have greater needs with respect to non-cognitive dimensions of learning than the students faculty were previously accustomed to teaching. Helping faculty adjust and develop the confidence and competency to effectively serve an increasingly diverse population of learners is a leading priority for Wright State as they move forward in scaling and refining their work in co-requisite remediation in math and English.

Citation: