Podcast Series on Remedial Education Reform AB 1705

Episode: Guest Hal Huntsman and Host Paul Fain Transcript

Paul Fain: All right. Speaking with how Huntsman. How are you?

Hal Huntsman: I'm doing great. Nice to talk with you.

Fain: Good to speak with you. So I gather that you did you did teach. You're an instructor in developmental math. Can you talk about your experience there?

Huntsman: Yeah, sure. I spent I don't know how many years, let's say several years, teaching developmental math for sure. I started really teaching lots of arithmetic and went through the sequencing and then developed like a physics course. So I've done a lot of developmental work and lots of different interventions, like we did lots of, you know, tried to think about the ways to help students get through those courses as best we could and worked in cohort programs, all kinds of different ways to sort of surround students with support around that. So lots of experience.

Fain: Now, knowing what we've all seen in terms of the research around what works and what doesn't occur, requisite versus traditional remedial, what do you think now about that experience? Like is there new context for you in thinking back about whether you were able to serve students?

Huntsman: Well, yeah, for sure. I mean, the evidence, I think, is pretty clear that, you know, that that did not serve students well. I'm not going to say there were no students who learned and succeeded. But if we think in terms of percentages and now I teach a lot of statistics, so I tend to think a lot in the patterns and percentages. We're talking about single digit percentages that would get through those sequences. So I now I see that as I mean, I'm not embarrassed about it. I'm, I'm I think we did lots of good work. I made lots of good relationships with students, but really failed to do what we wanted to do. You know, a lot of us think of ourselves as producing, you know, new math majors, new engineers, new scientists, all that sort of stuff. If you look at the percentages of students who went through those developmental sequences, that became those kinds of majors. I mean, it's even smaller. It's really gets to be that even at really large colleges, which I used to be at a pretty, you know, one of the largest in the state, you can literally count on fingers. And the number of students who went through those sequences and, you know, became a major I don't teach those courses anymore, and I'm glad I don't teach those classes anymore because I just would feel bad about doing that for my students because it wouldn't be doing it would be it's a disservice hugely. So obviously, this remains a controversial issue, I think probably safe to say, among math faculty, more so than English.

Fain: Among your peers, is there much acceptance of the need and the urgency to change and where you do see it? What tends to get folks on board with it?

Huntsman: I do think at this point, and it's one of the things that I've seen during my career in the community college system, like I remember in, let's say the early 2000, the debate and I mean, a real debate was, is there a equity gap? And we didn't call it that then, but that's what we were talking about. And I remember having a huge, like, institution wide discussion about whether there was one and coming to the place of, okay, we're pretty confident there is one. But there was still a lot of resistance to the even the idea that there was one. And but now that's if anybody believes it. And there probably are people who believe there is not that's not real. They're not saying it anymore. So in that way, we've made progress in the discussion. So I don't think, you know, your question of like, well, does anybody resist that idea? Not publicly, you know, not really. But then what do you do about it? That's where the resistance still is. What brings people on board with that is there's a couple of different things. One thing is, I've seen this now because I've gone through different iterations of reform. When I was developing our pre-statistics course at my previous college, I was literally told in a faculty meeting that I was destroying math, literally. And I mean, I just sort of said, okay, you know, you that's your perspective. And I mean, in my mind, I'm thinking, okay, you just said something that is not rational. And everybody who is rational can just say, you're here, that you just said something not rational. And so I'm not really going to have I don't have to say anything back to this. I'm just going to say, okay, we're going to move on because what else can you do then? We did it. We did have enough people that were like, Yeah, we should try this out and see how it goes. Well, we did it and the world didn't fall apart. And in fact, students did pretty good. And we had some success. And we were, you know, it was good, right? And so there is a piece of that that is happens like we've done the AB-705 reforms, maybe unevenly, but we've done them and the world hasn't fallen apart. Some people are won over by that. Oh yeah. My class is still pretty much like it was before. There's a little differences. Okay, whatever. But but just taking this step, which is, I think part of why the history of social reform and educational reform, but especially social reform in the country is largely driven by the courts. And the court says, yep, you're going to you're going to integrate that school or you're going to whatever it is, people resist, but it's a step. Otherwise it would just not happen or it would happen so slowly that 100 years from now we would do it. I don't love that the legislation legislators are like telling us what to do. That's not ideal, but honestly, we need it because otherwise, like, I never thought we'd be where we are in math reform and in California. In my career I was talking to students in 2008 and they were telling me we needed shorter sequences and my colleague and I who were talking to these students, looked at each other. So that might happen in 30 years, ten years later, boom. But that would never have happened if we didn't have the legislature. But it would have happened much, much more slowly.

Fain: Right. I think it's safe to say that the legislation has sped up the pace of change no matter where you are on this. And I'm going to make an editorial judgment that you did not

destroy. Math is still alive and well. You made a public statement supporting this new legislation. AB 1705 I know that that took some courage. Can you talk about why you did it and what the response has been?

Huntsman: So I did it because the larger union organization that represents me took a stand. If you look at their argument, the argument is not labor relations based. It actually does not even represent my interests. I mean, there is a labor argument around this legislation, but they didn't make it and they made instead an argument based on what I would characterize as sort of student choice argument. They don't actually even have any student organizations that they're working with on this, or at least they don't claim that they are what is a union except the collaboration of all of us. And if they're not if they're not representing me, I need to tell them. I don't know. I mean, you called it brave. I don't really think it was that brave. But basically, as far as you can tell, this legislation could help speed up that adoption. It will. I mean, really, what the so, you know, there's there was this memo that came out in I can't remember in the fall that this legislation basically codifies. And so that legislate that memo has greatly accelerated the pace of reform. And this just makes sure this is really making sure that everybody who's lagging on that, you know, really does it.

Fain: Well, Hal, thanks so much for talking about this with us. Appreciate you sharing your expertise here.

Huntsman: I enjoyed it.