

memorandum

Date: January 15, 2012

To: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office

From: WestEd and the RP Group

Question 3: Student Success Courses

What research is there on the effectiveness of student success courses in helping to improve community college student outcomes? What are the elements of an effective student success course?

Background

Based on their scores on the community college placement tests, some 70 percent of entering students at California community colleges are considered unready for college-level coursework in mathematics, reading, English, and/or English as a second language.¹ In addition to lacking adequate discipline- or subject-specific knowledge, many students lack the skills necessary to succeed in any college course, such as note-taking, time management, and establishing education goals.² Furthermore, ethnographic studies suggest that many students enter classrooms feeling academically inadequate, which may prevent them from fully engaging.³

In response to this lack of preparation, many colleges have developed student success courses aimed at better preparing students for college-level work and, thus, improving student outcomes. Student success courses generally include the following elements: an introduction to resources and rules at the community college (policies, tours, services); educational skills (note-taking, understanding one's learning style); career planning (interests, course planning); and life skills and personal development (time management, stress management, networking). Together, these skills provide an "academic toolkit" that can help students establish and meet their goals.

Student success courses also help students to develop a sense of community and belonging, and they shape participants' self-concepts as college students. A review of research on effective student support shows that colleges should do the following to improve student outcomes:

¹ Grubb, W. N., et al. (2011). *Understanding the "Crisis" in Basic Skills: Framing the Issues in Community Colleges*. Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.

² Conley, D. (2008). *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³ Cox, R. (2009). *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- connect students to the institution through personal relationships with other students, staff, or faculty;
- improve students' ability to navigate their way through the system;
- engage students by using pedagogy and instructional approaches that resonate with students' own experience and/or culture;
- clarify and focus students' attention on how academic success and completion will help them achieve life goals; and
- make students feel valued.⁴

Student success courses provide a means to incorporate all of these elements into a discrete intervention.

Scenarios for Implementation

Although student success courses generally include study skills, critical thinking, and academic planning, the way these courses are implemented varies widely. Student success courses may incorporate a number of structural elements and instructional approaches intended to improve student outcomes, such as

- first-year learning communities that are organized around a demographic cohort or area of interest;
- modularized guidance courses that cover such topics as college success, effective study skills, and college and life management;
- a discipline-specific focus so as to teach skills in context;
- access to other student services, such as textbook loans or EOPS services;
- pre-enrollment orientation to college;
- summer bridge programs;
- high school-based courses; and
- independent study, available either in person or electronically.

When planning to launch or expand student success courses, community college decision-makers should consider such issues as

- whether to offer a general student success course or to tailor it for specific constituencies (single mothers, older students, Latinos), goals (certificates, transfer), or subjects (basic skills, STEM, humanities);
- how inclusion of faculty and student-services staff meets contract or licensing requirements;
- how to provide adequate training if adjunct faculty or paraprofessionals will be teaching a success course;
- how to maintain class sizes that are small enough for successful cohort-building and robust interactions among students and the teacher;

⁴ Purnell, R., & Schiorring, E. (2011). *Student Support (Re)defined Literature Review*. Berkeley, CA: RP Group.

- whether classes are meeting both institutional and student goals, by tracking intended long-term outcomes such as persistence and completion, as well as shorter-term, course-specific outcomes such as mastering note-taking; and
- how to use outcome data to inform ongoing planning.

Research on Student Success Courses

Research on the effectiveness of student success courses is somewhat limited, but the findings are consistent: students who take student success courses tend to have more positive outcomes than students who do not.⁵ More specifically, the research finds that students who take student success courses are more likely to earn a credential and to transfer, and, compared to students who do not take a success course, they have higher grades and complete more credits, including completing more credits in math, reading, and writing.⁶

One study notes that students who took a student success course after the first semester wished they had taken it in their first semester instead.⁷ Student success courses are particularly important for basic skills students. Those who had been assessed as needing at least one developmental course attained better academic outcomes after taking a student success course, compared to a similar group of students who did not take such a course.⁸ For more vulnerable populations, student success courses are also commonly bundled with intensive supports, an approach that yields higher success rates.

These findings should be taken with some caution, however. While most studies attempted to control for differences between the types of students who took student success courses and those who did not, all the studies were limited in the measures available to them. It is likely that students who voluntarily enroll in student success courses are different from those who do not in ways that positively impact their education outcomes. However, none of the studies found worse outcomes for students who took a student success course compared to those who did not.

⁵ Cho, S. W. (2010). *Student Success Courses and Educational Outcomes in Virginia Community Colleges*. Presentation at the Association for the Study of Higher Education 2010 Annual Conference. Retrieved from <http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/108%20Cho%202010.pdf>; Stovall, M. (1999). *Relationships Between Participation in a Community College Student Success Course and Academic Performance and Persistence*. Thesis. Retrieved from <http://ocrl.illinois.edu/publications/dissertation/1999/1>; Stupka, E. (1993). *An Evaluation of the Short Term and Long Term Impact a Student Success Course Has on Academic Performance and Persistence*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED364300>; and Tebbe, C. M. (2007). *The Effectiveness of a Learning Strategies Course on College Student-Athletes' and Non-Athletes' Adjustment, Academic Performance and Retention after the First Two Years of College*. Dissertation. Retrieved from http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc5117/m1/1/high_res_d/dissertation.pdf

⁶ Zeidenberg, M., Jenkins, D., & Calcagno, J. C. (2007). *Do Student Success Courses Actually Help Community College Students Succeed?* Community College Research Center Brief. Retrieved from <http://www.broward.edu/PresidentDistrictBoard/SupportingContent/CCRC%20Brief%2036.pdf>

⁷ O'Gara, L., Karp, M. M., & Hughes, K. L. (2009). Student Success Courses in the Community College. *Community College Review*, 36(3), 195-218. Retrieved from <http://crw.sagepub.com/content/36/3/195.abstract>

⁸ Purnell, R., and Schiorring, E. (2011).

Two literature reviews outline the organizational and curricular factors that define effective student success courses:⁹

- **Build a strong team.** Student success courses should ideally be taught by a team of faculty, student services professionals, and administrators, all of whom have been trained in appropriate pedagogy. Approximately 70 percent of community colleges train instructors for teaching student success courses. Where possible, instructors should be full-time faculty or staff members who can provide additional support to students outside the classroom.
- **Integrate personal development.** Student success courses should help students develop emotional self-regulation strategies and assist in the development of motivation, possibly by building self-efficacy and teaching students to organize and complete the task at hand. They can also help to shape participants' identities as college students.
- **Foster connections.** Student success courses should encourage students to seek guidance and to utilize other student support services on campus. Peer-group and faculty interaction can also help students build a sense of community and belonging.
- **Engage students early.** Colleges should advertise student success courses to prospective students prior to matriculation, such as at local high schools and to entering students during orientation. Ideally, these courses should be taken in the first term to get students off to a strong start. Integrating student success courses into the first term of programs that have low retention and graduation rates has been shown to reverse these trends.
- **Award credit and use letter grades.** Half of community colleges count student success course credit toward general education, while the other half count it as an elective. About half of community colleges award 1 unit, about one-third award 3 or more credits, and about one-fifth award 2 credits. Nearly all use letter grades.
- **Require student success courses.** About 40 percent of community colleges require a student success or orientation course for all students; one-third require it for some students; and 20 percent do not require it at all.
- **Ensure quality and relevance.** Colleges should regularly assess program efficacy and quality and adjust courses to address changing needs.

Examples of Community Colleges Using Student Success Courses

Instructor Skip Downing, of **Baltimore Community College** in Maryland, recognized the need for a specific curriculum to help students become more active and responsible learners. He developed the widely used handbook *OnCourse*, and also created professional development on providing instructional and counseling supports for students — including an annual conference that draws 500 educators — and

⁹ Hope, L. (n.d.) *Literature Review of Student Success Courses*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching — Problem Solution Exploration Papers. Retrieved from <http://www.lanec.edu/lc/fresources/documents/LauraHopeLitReviewCollegeSuccess.pdf>; Stovall, M. (2000, January 1). Using Success Courses for Promoting Persistence and Completion. *New Directions for Community Colleges* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ625265). Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cc.v2000:112/issuetoc>

created a related resource website. *OnCourse* uses case studies taken from classroom experiences to coach students to think about their **rights and responsibilities as adult learners**. Students are taught that success in college results from a series of choices. Students can assess themselves by determining the degree to which they possess the eight traits of successful students and can learn how to overcome the traits more common to struggling students.¹⁰

Several two-year colleges, including **Roxbury Community College** in Massachusetts and **Shorter College** in Georgia, have shaped their student success courses by adopting the “**Learning to Learn**” **textbook**, which focuses on learning and critical thinking strategies. Outcome studies at Roxbury College found that 70 to 80 percent of students who took the course persisted to graduation, as compared with a 40 percent persistence rate for those who did not take the course. Shorter College reported a 38 percent improvement in retention between the first and second years. An additional study by the Department of Education found a 50 percent improvement in retention through graduation for students who took a course that used this textbook.¹¹

Foothill College offers a student success course called **Introduction to College**, which includes an orientation to academic policies, resources, programs and services, and an overview of the California system of higher education. Most students are required to take this class; at the end, they create an education plan. The class is taught by counselors, and it includes hands-on activities, such as a registration field trip during which students register for a course that is on their education plan, and useful tools, such as color-coded analyses of elective and mandatory courses required for transfer in specific disciplines to four-year colleges.¹²

Monroe Community College in New York has combined its basic skills and student success course offerings to create the **Transitional Studies department**. Faculty and counselors work together to provide advising, orientation, and other support geared toward student success in college, which is embedded into remedial reading, writing, and math topics.¹³

Cañada College’s Math Jam program offers several resources that help students to prepare for college-level math; to succeed in science, technology, engineering, and math fields; and to reduce their time to transfer. An intensive two-week summer program helps students prepare for the **math placement** test so they enter college ready to take pre-calculus. A similar one-week program is offered in the winter to review key math skills for students who will be retaking a placement test or want to be better prepared for a math course in the following semester.¹⁴

Valencia Community College links **remedial courses** with student success courses that teach study skills. In addition to improving completion rates for both courses, the approach has reportedly prompted many developmental education faculty to integrate study skills into all of their courses. The college has mandated that students demonstrating the need for developmental education in at least three categories

¹⁰ Downing, S. (n.d.) OnCourse website. Available at <http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Student%20Success%20Strategies.htm>

¹¹ Learning to Learn Outcome Studies. (n.d.) Available at <http://www.learningtolearn.com/college/collegestudies.html>

¹² L. Balducci (personal communication, November 15, 2011).

¹³ Monroe Community College Transitional Studies Department. Available at <http://www.monroecc.edu/etsdbs/mccatpub.nsf/56f69934f9a0559685257020006ed4f7/073678b3bcd175318525649500668502?OpenDocument>

¹⁴ Cañada College Summer Enrichment Programs. Available at <http://www.canadacollege.edu/bridge/>

participate in a student success class, a mandate that has resulted in an increase in retention rates from 58 percent to 79 percent.¹⁵

Miami Dade College in Florida has adopted an institution-wide policy mandating that first-time developmental education students take a Student Life Skills course. In addition to covering such traditional topics as study skills, college knowledge, and nonacademic resources and strategies, the course has participants **choose an education path**, establish an education plan, and enhance their understanding of services available to them.¹⁶

Santa Barbara Community College offers a half-credit personal development course that provides a focused way to help students learn essential college success skills, such as time management. These courses reach up to 2,000 students per term, with many sections providing **peer support groups** for at-risk groups, such as ESL students and single parents.¹⁷

San Diego City College hosts a **first-year experience** program that motivates students to actively participate in their own education pursuits. Students are required to attend at least two student success workshops over a semester and are encouraged to participate in campus life and student activities. The workshops include such topics as classroom etiquette, financial literacy, and transfer success. Participating students also have access to specific counseling services, tutors, and peer mentors, and they receive assistance with financial aid, scholarships, and career choices.¹⁸

Early College High Schools, also known as “**middle colleges**,” are small, autonomous schools that blend high school and college programs. Serving underrepresented students, such as first-generation college-goers, English language learners, and low-income students, middle colleges enable students to co-enroll in high school and college courses, allowing them to earn two years of college credit while completing their high school education. Students also receive guidance on how to succeed as a college student, including skills assessments and identification of counterproductive behaviors. Middle colleges include targeted outreach to middle schools, to identify students who can most benefit from this type of opportunity.¹⁹

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¹⁵ Booth, K., & Karandjeff, K. (2011). *Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence Site Visit Report*. Berkeley, CA: RP Group.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ San Diego City College. First Year Experience Services. Available at <http://www.sdcity.edu/fye>

¹⁹ California Department of Education. Early College High School. Available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/echsgen.asp>