

Critical Questions for Student Services: Research and Implications for Practice in California Community Colleges

In 2011, matriculation staff from the California Community Colleges' Chancellor's Office posed eight questions regarding student services delivery methods and structures. The staff was seeking to better understand research and effective practices related to student services approaches that were under discussion by the Task Force on Student Success—a group appointed by the California Community Colleges' Board of Governors to develop a strategic blueprint for improving community college success. These questions also addressed issues that the staff had been contemplating as part of its strategic planning.

These questions were:

- Is there research on the value or benefit of mandating orientation, assessment, and counseling to improve student success and completion in community college? If so, what has the research found? If not, are there example(s) of colleges are testing out those practices?
- Does the research provide any information about the effectiveness of using college paraprofessionals and instructional faculty to provide orientation and counseling to students? If so, are there any negative consequences to students? Does having expanded access to these services through other college staff, other than counselors, help improve student success? If not, are there example(s) of some colleges that are employing paraprofessionals in those ways?
- What research is there on the effectiveness of student success courses to help improve community college student outcomes (such as student success courses in high school)? What are elements of an effective student success course?
- What does the research say about using standard cut-scores? What are experiences from other states?
- Does the research provide information on the effectiveness of automated degree audits and online education plans for improving student outcomes (persistence, degree/certificate completion, etc.)? If so, please summarize the research.
- Identify successful models where academic and student affairs are integrated.
- Are some student support services demonstrated to be more effective for high need, high touch students, and low need students? If so what services are most effective for each group of students?
- How could technology be used to provide quality support services to students?

Two educational research organizations, WestEd and the RP Group, collaborated to produce brief memos on each of the questions, written at a level that would be appropriate for the Chancellor's Office staff. WestEd conducted a review of the literature, while the RP Group identified institutions that had implemented the methods addressed by each question, as well as contextual and implementation concerns specific to the California community colleges.

The combined memos present a picture of how student services are evolving in community colleges, the pressures created by budget cuts, and the complexity of helping student successfully prepare for and navigate college environments. Some of the key insights of these memos include:

- When seeking to improve students' outcomes, issues such as assessment and cut scores for placement in developmental education cannot be isolated from curriculum.
- Student services, particularly those that combine multiple interventions and integrate academic and student affairs, help increase success rates, especially for more vulnerable populations.
- The budget shortfall, institutional cultures, and policy structures make it difficult for student services to be expanded, mandated, or integrated into other elements of community college structures.
- Many colleges are using paraprofessionals and faculty to provide some student services functions—particularly those that focus on navigating college structures and requirements—but continue to have experts provide counseling on personal challenges and technical issues like financial aid.
- Although promising, implementation of technology-assisted student services is labor-intensive, necessitates training of community college professionals and students, and must be fully integrated into college processes.

While each of these memos can be read as a stand-alone document, particularly for those familiar with California community colleges, many of the topics are interrelated. Reading all eight memos together helps to provide a clearer picture of how student services can contribute to student success.