

RETHINKING ENTRY INTO COLLEGE

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Community colleges—by mission and definition—provide access to higher education. They were created as institutions with open doors for students who could not afford college, who were academically under-prepared or who wanted to stay close to home and family. Each year, more than 40% of entering freshmen in higher education enroll at community collegesⁱ. While some students enter community college academically ready for college level work, increasing numbers—and at many colleges, the majority of entering students—are assessed and placed into developmental education.

What welcome do these students receive when they arrive on campus? Community colleges typically have an orientation, frequently a day or less. Orientation may include an overview of campus resources, perhaps enacted as a scavenger hunt. Often these orientations are optional (or, as often, overlooked by students). However, with growing attention both to student engagement and to the importance of the first experiences on campus, there is a move to make orientation mandatory. For example, the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force recommends that all incoming students participate in orientation.ⁱⁱ

Daily skills of being a student—note taking or test taking—may also be included in orientation and extended over the semester in a student success course. These success courses have been designed based on the belief that students have “poor study habits and lack clear goals for college and careers.”ⁱⁱⁱ Studies conducted of the effects of enrolling in student success courses have been positive, though quite modest.^{iv} These courses are also typically optional, although some colleges have come to require enrollment, particularly for developmental students.

By requiring orientation or success courses, college leaders are looking for ways to increase student retention and continuity. Data show that nearly 50% of entering students drop out before their second year^v.

In *Back to School*^{vi}, Mike Rose thoughtfully describes the need for a broader, more inclusive way to think about orientation and student support. “We typically talk about these things in terms of ‘study skills’ and ‘time management,’ and we attempt to remedy problems related to such issues through orientation programs or workshops. And, students can learn useful things in them. But the focus tends to be on techniques—how to schedule your day, how to highlight your textbook—while what I’m after here is something more of an orientation to learning, a way of being in school.”

The 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges report, *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation’s Future*^{vii} challenges the field to

“reimagine the community college required for new times.” The Commission sets forth a set of imperatives it calls the “Three Rs: *Redesign* students’ educational experiences. *Reinvent* institutional roles. *Reset* the system to create incentives for student and institutional success.”

Taking seriously the 21st Century Commission’s challenge of redesigning the community college, what would it look like to reinvent the initial experiences students have on entering community college?

A growing number of voices in research and practice call for a comprehensive approach to student support in orientation, student success courses, counseling, and in the classroom itself. Studies well-summarized by Paul Tough in *How Children Succeed*^{viii} have recognized not only the importance of addressing the affective domain, but that the affective is an integral part of learning. Hunter Boylan, the director of the National Center for Developmental Education notes that, “The weaker a student’s cognitive skills, the more important other affective factors are in student success.”^{ix} A recent qualitative study by Community College Research Center (CCRC), *They Never Told Me What to Expect, so I Didn’t Know What to Do*^x found that “community college success is dependent not only upon academic preparation but also upon a host of important skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are often left unspoken.”

The community college experience can be confusing for entering students, particularly recent high school grads. In many ways community colleges resemble high school, and in other ways, the educational and behavioral rules have changed. But those changes have not necessarily been made explicit. Could orientation be designed as a more intensive experience that initiates the student into the overall intellectual and geographic landscape and provides them with a sense of what the educational journey will entail, mapping the transition from high school to community college and the subsequent move to degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year institution and beyond?

The Center for Community College Student Engagement, recognizing the vital importance of the initial interactions and experiences of students, has created the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE)^{xi} that focuses on the first three weeks of the semester. SENSE measures the benchmarks of early connections, high expectations and aspirations, clear academic plan and pathway, effective track to college readiness, engaged learning, and academic and social support network.

Literature and practice have recognized that new students come to college with optimism, hope and the belief that they will succeed in college. However, it is just as widely recognized that by the third week, students become discouraged, bored, disengaged and may withdraw energetically or procedurally. As noted above, the SENSE initiative has found that engaged learning within the first three weeks of the semester is critical for determining student success.^{xii}

What would make it possible to draw on students' initial enthusiasm and ground their hope in experiences that will effectively prepare them for the academic demands?

An orientation that only includes a quick tour of the college and its resources is a missed opportunity. A redesigned orientation could be an opportunity for students to rethink their identity as college students. Orientation could welcome the whole person to college, describe the geographic and intellectual landscape they will have the opportunity to explore, and begin to plan the students' academic journey. If orientation is extended beyond a day or two, it could become a time to learn and practice academic and even professional behaviors in a supportive environment.

The Academy for College Excellence Foundation of Leadership Course

The Academy for College Excellence (ACE) is a student support approach that focuses on building intrinsic student engagement. ACE was designed by Diego Navarro at Cabrillo College; now more than half a dozen other community colleges have implemented programs based on ACE and have incorporated the Foundation of Leadership Course (Foundation Course) as the introduction to a range of academically oriented courses or career technical education programs.

The Foundation of Leadership Course is an example of what a redesigned orientation and transition to college might look like. The Foundation Course is an eight-day intensive and each day is a full-time, nine-to-five schedule, like a work day. The curriculum does not begin with the same academics that students have seen before in high school (or earlier) and are likely to see again in developmental English or mathematics classes. Instead, students start with a range of hands-on experiences that focus on professional 21st century skills; students gain the academic and affective skills that prepare them not only for college, but for professional work and life beyond school.

In creating the Foundation Course, Navarro drew on a wide range of influences, starting with his own negative and positive school experiences in public schools through high school, community college, liberal arts colleges, and graduate school. He also drew from work experiences in high tech, as well as theories and research from fields as diverse as sociology, education, engineering, neurobiology and management. The ACE design brings together the perspectives of liberal arts education, high tech product design, and community organizing.

Navarro wanted to design a program flexible enough to serve the wide population of students who come to community college, but also explicit enough to serve more vulnerable students who enroll but are tentatively connected to college academics and culture. These students' strengths

are rooted in their complex lives: they have survived in difficult communities and have a range of work and family responsibilities. In fact, it is a measure of strength to even come to college when earlier school experiences have not been positive. However, these students need to understand academic culture and begin to identify as college students. They need the opportunity to learn and practice classroom behaviors such as attendance, punctuality, and participation. Finally, if they are to succeed and persist, students need a network of supportive relationships that will be a counter balance and keep them in school when other forces pull them away.

The Foundation Course is not designed solely for vulnerable students. All students can benefit from the experience and in fact, much of the same material is used with faculty and administrators in ACE's professional development curriculum. However, ACE, and particularly the Foundation Course, was designed to be sure that vulnerable students, who have not been well-served by the educational system, do not fall through the cracks again.

The design characteristics of the Foundation Course are both structural and thematic.

Content focus – 21st century skills

The major content of the Foundation Course is 21st Century professional skills. The National Research Council's recent publication *Education for Life and Work Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*^{xiii} describes the challenge: "Business, political, and educational leaders are increasingly asking schools to integrate development of skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration into the teaching and learning of academic subjects. These skills are often referred to as '21st century skills' or 'deeper learning.'"

The Foundation Course focuses on communication and work styles to be part of a collaborative team. The curriculum has been adapted from professional development materials used with high tech executive leaders. This choice of curriculum in the Foundation Course has a number of educational advantages. First, the content is different from anything students have seen in school before, so it does not trigger old school responses. In addition, work is a powerful motivator for students. They see college as a way to better jobs and better lives. In the Foundation Course students learn to recognize their own skills and to recognize and work with the skills of others.

Learning skills and learning strategies are the most important things I've learned because I'm learning new things about myself. –ACE student

Foundation Course structure

The Foundation Course is eight days, four days a week for the first two weeks of the semester, or as part of a summer bridge, before the semester starts. The daily schedule is full-time: eight

hours a day, like a job. In fact, many students get time off from their jobs or can arrange flexible schedules to allow them to attend the Foundation Course because the employers see the value of college education for their workers. This is an intensive time to ‘light the fire,’ to build a sense of college identity and belonging and an excitement about learning. Students get to know other students and form a community. And two weeks is long enough to lay down new habits and practice and repeat behaviors such as punctuality and participation. Especially with the break between weeks, there is time for students to apply their new skills to their lives outside of the classroom and bring experiences back to school.

Something happens in the intensity of the Foundation Course, something happens in the 8-5 day, that doesn't happen in twice a week classes— ACE teacher

Explicitly address the affective

In biology, a precursor is a cell or tissue that gives rise to a variant, specialized, or more mature form. In chemistry, a precursor is a chemical that is transformed into another compound and precedes that compound in the synthetic pathway. In the Foundation Course, the affective classroom experiences are precursors—experiences that are the base for students to grow into academic competence and maturity. Tough’s *How Children Succeed*^{xiv} points out not only the importance of character education but also the fact that non-cognitive skills can be learned. The intent of the Foundation Course is for students to build intrinsic motivation and confidence. ACE provides a liminal space—a transitional place between one state and another—where it is safe for students to try things that are unfamiliar and learn that mistakes are an inherent part of learning. The theme for the Foundation Course is “It is your choice.” This means that it is the student’s choice to come to school, to be on time, to be prepared and ready to learn, to grow and to be engaged.

I have learned that I am capable of passing and achieving my college goals if I am determined and have a good strategy. –ACE student

Foster individual growth & community:

The Foundation Course is a time for students to strengthen their relationships with themselves and with others, including peers and teachers. As they do so, the students build a safety net among their peers, learning to value both similarities and differences in a closely bonded community. As the students move into the next stage of academic courses, they have friends to turn to with questions as well as a sense of the strengths and supports they have to offer others. The community becomes a virtual dormitory, with contact and support available beyond the classroom, at all hours day and night.

I've learned how to connect with people, I also learned that most of us come from a rough past and that now we are here to make a change in our lives. —ACE student

Experiential instruction

The experiential instruction of the Foundation Course is a pragmatic amalgam of progressive education seasoned with behaviorism. The Foundation Course is organized around learning by doing; the content is structured as a series of activities, each followed by reflection. The rhythm of each day moves between large and small group discussions, with moments of playfulness and physical movement interspersed to keep energy up. The activities move from concrete to abstract. Over time, as students gain trust in the community, activities shift from safe and impersonal to more personal.

I've learned that you always have a chance to better your learning. And being involved, because when I was in school, I was always one not to ask questions and that would lead to not understanding assignments. —ACE student

The educational philosophy can be described not only as experiential but as experimental. Students become pragmatic scientists, they take the ideas and skills they are learning about communication and collaboration and test them outside of the classroom. In their lives, they use their skills of observation to see how these approaches work beyond the classroom. Many find the core material relevant to their lives and this reinforces their learning and commitment.

Teacher professional development

In order for faculty to understand the experiential pedagogy of the Foundation Course, they need a hands-on experience of the content because faculty's formal education doesn't usually include experiential pedagogy. The Faculty Experiential Learning Institute (FELI) is a five-day version of the Foundation Course curriculum designed for community college faculty, staff and administrators. Teachers who go through the FELI find the skills they learn there useful not only in the classroom, but in their personal and broader professional lives as well. The theme of the FELI is "Reconceptualizing Education."

The FELI was transforming, exhausting and enlightening. It took my communication skills and my leadership skills to the next level. —FELI Faculty Participant

After the FELI I was more willing to take chances in the classroom, and be more vulnerable to students. It helps me connect to the students, to put myself out there, and expose myself in terms of humanity so they show more of themselves.— FELI Faculty Participant

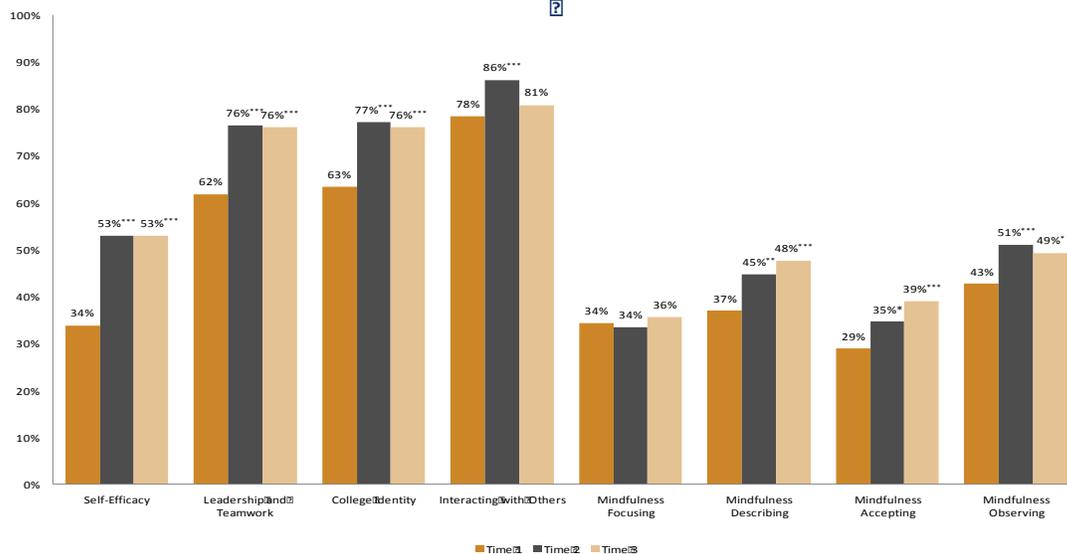
Outcomes

A series of evaluative studies have demonstrated the positive academic effects of the ACE program at different colleges. In particular, studies of positive affective changes have been shown for students in the Foundation Course. In collaboration with professor of psychology (emeritus) Martin Chemers and MPR Associates, ACE created the College Student Self-Assessment Survey^{xv} (CSSAS) to assess student’s perceptions of their own Academic Behavior, Mindsets, Perseverance/Self-Control, Social Skills, and Self Awareness. In a study of 535 ACE students from seven colleges^{xvi}, before and after the Foundation Course and four months later at the end of the semester, the results show statistically significant differences in growth on almost all factors measured (see chart below). In addition, ACE students showed significant growth in the dimensions of Academic Self-Efficacy & Hope, College Identity, Teamwork & Leadership, Interacting with Others (Communication & Personal Responsibility), Describing, Accepting, and Observing.^{xvii}

7 College Study of 535 Students ACE’s Non-Cognitive Effect on Students

Percent of ACE Participants Scoring in Top Quartile of CSSAS Factor Scales

Time 1, 2, and 3 are time measures before, during and after the ACE Program Semester



- Notes: ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; Statistical significance is based on comparison with Time 1 scores.
- The Y-axis represents the percentage of students who scored in the top quartile of the CSSAS factor scale.

Time 1 in the chart was taken before the Foundation Course. Time 2 was taken at the end of the 8 day Foundation Course. Time 3 was taken four months after the start of the Foundation Course, at the end of the semester.

MPR Associates are also conducting a three-semester longitudinal study of ACE students at multiple colleges. Not only are they documenting students' affective changes, but they are also finding differences in persistence and performance. For example, in the latest longitudinal study (January 2013) of 658 students from four colleges (where two colleges have scaled to serve over 250 ACE students per year), compared to a matched control group^{xviii} ACE students are more likely—by 112%— to complete transfer-level English within two semesters after completing the ACE semester. These results confirm the findings of Community College Research Center 2009 evaluation of the ACE program.

The ACE Foundation Course provides a case for an orientation that prepares the whole student for academics by starting with, and focusing on, the affective domain. Students complete the Foundation Course prepared to take on academic challenges, aware that in order to succeed in an academic environment they will need to work, struggle and persist. These students go into their academic learning environment with more confidence in themselves and more active sources of support.

Conclusion

Community colleges represent the country's belief in access to higher education for all. Any number of community college leaders and recent reports reaffirm the importance of making good on that promise. Students come to community colleges from a wide range of backgrounds—age, ethnicity, education, and socio-economic. And they come with a wide range of dreams and aspirations. Orientation is the first interaction students have with the college. If orientation were redesigned, and dramatically re-imagined, it could welcome the whole person and give them experiences to build on that would prepare them to succeed in education and professional careers.

Endnotes:

ⁱ AACC Fast Facts <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Pages/fastfacts.aspx>

ⁱⁱ *Advancing Student Success in the California Community Colleges* The Recommendations of the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force (Recommendation 2.2) 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ CCRC Brief #36 *Do Student Success Courses Actually Help Community College Students Succeed?* Matthew Zeidenberg, Davis Jenkins & Juan Carlos Calcagno, New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. June 2007

^{iv} CCRC Brief #36 Research by the Community College Research Center, retrospectively studying the effects of enrollment in a student success course in community colleges in Florida, found positive though moderate effects. . . . However, the results were marginal though statistically significant: enrollment for students who did not require remedial courses was associated with a 9 percent increase in the probability of success. For students who enrolled in one or more credits of remediation enrollment was associated with a 5 percent increase. June 2007

The results of a study of students in Virginia community colleges were similarly moderate. *Promoting Gatekeeper Course Success Among Community College Students Needing Remediation Findings and Recommendations from a Virginia Study* (Summary Report) Davis Jenkins, Shanna Smith Jaggars, Josipa Roksa November 2009

^v <http://www.ccsse.org/sense/aboutsense/>

^{vi} Mike Rose, Back to School, *Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education* The New Press 2012

^{vii} The 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges report, *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future* American Association of Community Colleges. April 2012

^{viii} Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012

^{ix} Hunter Boylan “Targeted Intervention for Developmental Education Students” *Journal of Developmental Education* VOLUME 32, ISSUE 3 • SPRING 2009 NCDE has published a collection of instruments to assess the affective domain *Research in Developmental Education* vol 22 issue 1, 2008

http://ncde.appstate.edu/sites/ncde.appstate.edu/files/RiDE_22_1.pdf

http://ncde.appstate.edu/sites/ncde.appstate.edu/files/RiDE_22_2.pdf

^x CCRC Working Paper No. 47. *They Never Told Me What to Expect, so I Didn't Know What to Do: Defining and Clarifying the Role of a Community College Student* Melinda Mechur Karp and Rachel Hare Bork. July 2012

^{xi} http://www.ccsse.org/sense/survey/bench_engagedlearning.cfm

^{xii} http://www.ccsse.org/sense/survey/bench_engagedlearning.cfm

^{xiii} National Research Council *Education for Life and Work Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century* July 2012

^{xiv} Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012

^{xv} <http://academyforcollegeexcellence.org/cssas/>

^{xvi} Berkeley City College, Cabrillo College, Delaware County Community College, Hartnell College, Las Positas College, Los Medanos College, Southwest Virginia Community College.

^{xvii} The factors focusing, describing, accepting and observing are aspects of mindfulness as measured in the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills.

The MPR report will be posted at <http://academyforcollegeexcellence.org/>

^{xviii} This study uses propensity score matching methodology and the regressions against a comparison group of over 124,000 students confirms the trends

Author bios

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Diego James Navarro is a full-time instructor at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz County, California, where he has been teaching and developing the Academy for College Excellence (ACE), formerly known as the Digital Bridge Academy for the last eleven years. Diego began his higher education at Pasadena City College, while supporting himself as a computer support specialist at Bank of America. Diego's commitment to social change grew, in part, while he was still in college working as a community organizer for the American Friends Service Committee—a Quaker humanitarian aid organization. He has more than twenty years of experience in research and management with Hewlett Packard Labs, Apple Computer, and was CEO of two successful high-tech start-up companies. Diego holds a B.S. in Information Systems from Antioch University and a graduate degree from Harvard University's Graduate School of Business.