Student Support (Re)defined

**Equitable
Integrated
Cost Effective**

Research Design & Methodology

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Research Overview

Student Support (Re)defined aims to understand how—in an environment of extreme scarcity—community colleges can deliver support both inside and outside the classroom to improve success for *all* students. Through this multi-year study (2011-2014), the RP Group will:

- Ask students what factors are most important to their success, paying special attention to what African Americans and Latinos cite as critical to their achievement (Year 1)

- Engage practitioners in reflecting on students' perspectives, identifying specific strategies and approaches for supporting success and exploring ways to sustain and scale these supports in a cost-effective manner (Year 2)

- Promote dialog and action at both the institution and system levels about how to implement student supports and improve completion strategically, particularly for historically underrepresented populations (Ongoing, focused in Year 3)

It is not the purpose of this study to examine the effect certain student characteristics and behaviors have on the successful achievement of outcomes such as degree or certificate completion and transfer. Instead, the RP Group purposefully designed this study so that students' perspectives drive our examination of support. Through this approach, we intend to contribute to the expanding body of research on this issue grounded specifically in students' experiences. Moreover, we expect that their perspectives will both (1) offer concrete strategies for community

college educators to consider and (2) keep the dialog about redefining support focused on students during the practitioner and dissemination phases of this project.

Research Framework and Design

The study will explore the following question:

> *In an environment of extreme scarcity, which student support activities can be delivered inside and outside of the classroom to improve success for all students, paying special attention to African-American and Latino learners?*

Support may include institutional structures, approaches and activities that can be integrated into students' daily experience and/or the overall curriculum.

Before launching this investigation, the RP Group engaged in an initial literature review and preliminary discussions with key community college practitioners and researchers to: (1) place this study in the context of existing research and current initiatives to change the provision of student supports and (2) inform development of our own project's activities. Two questions guided this foundational research:

1. Which are the essential elements/components of supports that increase success, particularly for historically underrepresented student populations?

2. What is known about how to determine the cost effectiveness of student support systems, structures and strategies?

Defining Factors that Lead to Student Success. Based on the Community College Research Center's 2011 Assessment of Evidence Series (AES) (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2011) and a review of hundreds of studies on strategies designed to increase student success, two key assumptions emerged. Student support activities must be (1) integrated into students' daily experience and (2) included in the overall curriculum.

This research also indicated that students are more likely to succeed when they are, directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected and valued. We define these factors as follows:

- **Directed:** helping students clarify their aspirations, develop an educational focus they perceive as meaningful and develop a plan that moves them from enrollment to achievement of their goal

- **Focused:** fostering students' motivation and helping them develop the skills needed to achieve their goals

- **Nurtured:** conveying a sense of "authentic caring" where students' success is important and expected

- **Engaged:** actively involving students in meaningful and authentic educational experiences and activities inside and outside the classroom

- **Connected:** creating connections between students and the institution and cultivating relationships that underscore how students' involvement with the college community can contribute to their academic and personal success

- **Valued:** providing students with opportunities to contribute to and enrich the college culture and community

Determining Cost-Effective Student Support. While more limited in scope, the literature on cost effectiveness indicated three research strategies for balancing the cost of a particular support program or initiative against the benefits realized by both the institution and its students. These strategies include: (1) creating a formula or approach to calculate the costs of offering a set of classes, services or activities (Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jaggars & Edgecombe, 2010; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd & Cullinan, 2012); (2) determining the costs to the college of student attrition or completion (Jones, 1986) and (3) calculating the return on investment or downstream revenue of the positive effects of change after an intervention (Boroch et al, 2010).

For a full summary of the literature reviewed, including specific research on the six success factors and cost-effective student supports, please visit: http://www.rpgroup.org/content/research-framework.

Research Methodology

The RP Group is using a mixed-methods approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative data and analyses. Utilizing a number of qualitative research activities allows us to gather input directly from students, faculty and staff through the abovementioned literature review, surveys and focus groups. The study is also linking quantitative data on students' characteristics and academic history to their survey responses. The RP Group is using data from the Chancellor's Office Management Information System (COMIS) to access variables such as fields of study, units completed, use of student services and demographics. Additionally, in keeping with the RP Group's emphasis on the applied inquiry model, we have chosen to use an action research framework for Student Support (Re)defined. As we conduct this study, we want to involve participants and researchers in a reflective process that regularly examines the study's findings in order to help guide, refine and revise the proposed activities and approaches based on what both researchers and practitioners observe and learn.

College Selection

Student Support (Re)defined is focusing its research activities on students and practitioners within a defined group of institutions. In an attempt to develop as broad a representation as possible from the 112 California community colleges, the RP Group used the following criteria to select colleges that could provide a geographically and demographically diverse sample:

- Significant African-American or Latino student population

- High transfer rates among African-American and/or Latino students

- Location to achieve representation in the northern, southern and central parts of the state

- Location to achieve representation of urban, suburban and rural areas in the state

- College size to achieve representation of small, medium and large institutions

Participating Colleges

The RP Group identified and contacted 15 colleges that met these criteria; 12 agreed to participate in the survey and one additional institution agreed to participate in only the focus groups (see map, *Participating Colleges*).

Study Phases

This study includes three primary phases. In Phase 1, the RP Group collected student perspectives on what supports their success. In Phase 2, we will gather practitioner input on these student perspectives and identify related effective practices that can be sustained and scaled in a cost-efficient manner. In Phase 3, the RP Group will focus on the broad dissemination of study findings and assist groups interested in taking action with this research. The following section further describes each research phase.

Phase 1: Student Perspectives (2011-12)

The RP Group launched Student Support (Re)defined in fall 2011 and concluded this phase of research in spring 2012. The general research questions guiding this phase were:

1. What supports, both inside and outside of the classroom, do students identify as important to their success as community college students?

2. What is the interaction among the six factors of success?

3. How do the above results vary for different groups of students?

These three research questions were translated into a series of specific research questions designed to examine students' assessment of each of the six success factors in both the survey and focus groups (*please see p. 9 for a full description of these questions*).

Data Collection and Analysis. Data were collected from students using two methods, a telephone survey and focus groups. The intent of the survey was to collect information from a large number of students and the focus groups were used to explore themes and topics highlighted in the survey in greater depth. The overall data analysis goals for both the survey and focus groups were to:

- Analyze findings based on an examination of univariate responses to determine which factors students believe are critical to their success

- Explore interactions between the above findings and selected student characteristics through cross-tabulations with an emphasis on those factors that appear to be particularly effective for Latino and African-American students

- Conduct multivariate analyses to explore interactions among variables and student characteristics

- Identify themes in the findings that speak directly to how colleges can support students differently that could result in improved student success

Survey. Participating colleges were asked to submit files through secure protocols containing demographic and contact information for students who met the following criteria:

- **Current students**: those enrolled in the fall 2011 term

- **Completers**: those who had obtained a certificate or degree between fall 2010 and spring 2011

- **Leavers**: those who were enrolled in spring 2011, but not enrolled in fall 2011 and had not earned a certificate or degree prior to fall 2011

We created a stratified random sample of 10,918 students using the files received from the colleges and then submitted this sample to the California State University Fullerton's Social Science Research Center, with whom the RP Group contracted to conduct the student survey via phone. The strata for the sample were composed of:

- Approximately equal numbers of students from each college

- Approximately 30% African-American, 30% Latino, 30% White and 10% students of other ethnicities

- Approximately equal numbers of students from each of three enrollment categories (current students, completers, leavers)

A total of 785 students were surveyed. The surveys were conducted between January 24 and March 7, 2012. Respondents were asked approximately 41 questions about the quality of education received, the degree to which they were involved on their campus, the types of services and programs they engaged in while enrolled, how the campus could have enhanced

their educational experience and the factors that contributed to their overall success (or lack thereof). For leavers, an additional subset of questions was asked to explore what factors led to their premature departure.

Students' survey responses were then linked with their data from COMIS to include information such as students' ethnicity, age, gender, educational goal, field of study, units completed and use of student supports such as Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS) or Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS).

Focus Groups. The RP Group conducted student focus groups at four of the 13 participating colleges. Focus groups were drawn from a convenience sample of students identified by college staff and, in some cases, specifically targeting African-American and Latino students. A total of 102 students participated in the focus groups across the four campuses. The focus groups were held between March 27 and April 12, 2012. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes. The sessions were recorded and then transcribed. No identifiable information was collected from participants; therefore, a demographic description of the participants is not possible.

The focus groups began with a general question asking participants what was the most important thing that had happened to them at the college that had helped them be successful as students. This question was asked before the six factors for success were introduced in order to see whether students' responses would fit within the research framework. This question was followed by six questions each related to one of the six success factors. At the conclusion of the focus groups, students were given a brief survey asking them to rate the six factors in order of importance to their own success and write one or two sentences explaining why their number one choice was most important to their success.

Phase 2: Practitioner Perspectives (2012-13)[1]

After the research team completes Phase 1, we will present the student perspectives findings to the field through convenings designed to engage practitioners in conversations about these results. We will likely conduct focus groups with a representative sample of 50 to 60 practitioners selected with assistance from key administrators at a subset of the participating colleges. The focus groups will explore key themes and findings highlighted during student interviews and focus groups. We will also hold practitioner convenings that focus on strategies that can be offered for little or no added expenses (e.g., using a cohort approach). The information gathered from these convenings and practitioner focus groups along with the results from the student interviews and focus groups will allow us to document critical micro-elements, skill sets, funding mechanisms and policies that shape the implementation of the programs and pedagogies that provide student support.

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[1] The RP Group will likely revise this methodology document as Phase 2 and 3 are conducted to more accurately reflect research activities as they take place.

Data Analysis for Phase 2

The research design for Phases 2 and Phase 3 is in development although we anticipate that the results from the student survey and focus groups will serve as the basis for the research questions that we will develop for Phase 2. In using an action research approach, an iterative process will be employed where we will analyze, share and discuss the student data with key stakeholders and the larger research team and then revise and refine the research activities and design as appropriate. We anticipate that the data that we will gather will be qualitative in nature and analyzed in the same way as the student perspectives research.

When analyzing the cost effectiveness of key strategies that are mentioned by a large majority of students and practitioners, we may determine the costs to start and maintain these approaches over time. Rather than focusing on the detailed costs of specific elements, we will estimate general expenditures that could be associated with the highlighted practices and approaches.

Phase 3: Dissemination and Communication (2012-14)

Throughout the project, the RP Group will host convenings to discuss results and analyze implications with decision-makers, faculty, staff and students, including identifying both near-term modifications that can be made on individual college campuses and longer-term policy changes that might occur at the system or state level. The RP Group will also engage in a number of dissemination activities such as publishing recommendations and insights gained at the convenings and developing video shorts, tailored briefs and discussion guides. Written documents will describe key findings and recommendations raised during the convenings and present detailed menus of cost-effective actions that can be taken to strengthen student support and achievement by various constituent groups. Whenever possible, the RP Group will identify opportunities to present the videos and findings at regional meetings, conferences, statewide and national meetings to engage students, faculty, staff and leaders in further action planning.

Data Analysis for Phase 3

The project's action research framework will provide the RP Group with an opportunity to engage in a number of research activities while sharing findings with key stakeholders to engage them as thought partners and to incite them to action as results become available. At the conclusion of related convenings and presentations, a brief survey will be fielded to determine what worked well and what did not to enhance the RP Group's ability to better play a convener role. Several months after these convenings and the release of the video shorts and discussion guides, follow-up surveys will be conducted with senior college administrators and practitioners and education policymakers. Follow-up surveys will aim to determine whether the convenings and/or the written materials produced by the RP Group have led to lasting impacts such as changes in their awareness of and access to relevant research about support services. The surveys will also assess the usefulness of the research in helping them to promote, improve and develop more effective support for their students.

In addition, a website for the project has been developed where all information about the study will be posted including results from the student and practitioner perspectives research, video shorts and other written documents produced as part of this study. In order to examine usage and possible impact, diagnostics will be run to determine how often they are accessed and downloaded. To access the website, visit: http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support.

For more information:

Visit www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support or
contact Dr. Darla Cooper, Project Director (dcooper@rpgroup.org).

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Student Perspectives – Specific Research Questions

Success Factor	Guiding Research Questions
Connected	• What are the nature, quantity and quality of students' connectedness to the institution? • What is the relationship between students' connectedness and the other factors related to success?
Directed	• Can students articulate an educational goal and do they know the steps required to achieve this goal? • What is the relationship between students having an educational goal and the other factors related to success?
Engaged	• What factors related to the instructor, course content and course structure do students identify as most important to their learning? • What is the relationship between students' sense of classroom engagement and the other factors related to success?
Focused	• What motivates or hinders students' ability to make a commitment to actively pursue their education? • What is the relationship between students' commitment to their education and the other factors related to success?
Nurtured	• What are the most significant types of support -- both personal and academic -- that an instructor or staff can provide to make a student feel important? • What is the relationship between students' feelings of being nurtured and the other factors related to success?
Valued	• What institutional structures do students feel provide them with opportunities to contribute to and enrich the college culture and community? • What is the relationship between students feeling valued and the other factors related to success?

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) strengthens the ability of California community colleges to undertake high quality research, planning and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness and success for all students.

Student Support (Re)defined
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Who supports this study?

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