

Exploring the Evidence: Campus-Wide Initiatives in the First College Year

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Comprehensive College Success Courses Increase Student Persistence, Self-Confidence and Satisfaction

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II. Describe your institution and its students

Cuyamaca College is a public community college located in El Cajon, California. It is a commuter college that offers a variety of programs in vocational education, transfer studies and courses for personal enrichment. Approximately 8000 students attend Cuyamaca College. Many of these students are part time students, which makes the full time equivalent student enrollment 5,183. Each semester, approximately 60 percent are continuing students and 40 percent are new students. Some of these new students are first time students and others are returning to college after a period of absence from education. No statistics are maintained on first generation students although the college has an Educational Opportunity Program for low income and first generation students that has approximately 525 students each year. Cuyamaca College has an enrollment of 56 percent female students and 44 percent male students. Forty percent of students enrolled in the college are over 25 years of age. Since Cuyamaca College is located near the Mexican border, it has a very diverse population of students with only 56 percent of students in the white, non-Hispanic category.

III. Program/Initiative Description

Currently at Cuyamaca College, 1600 students enroll yearly in Personal Development 124 (PDC 124), Lifelong Success. Approximately 50% of these students are first time students under 20 years old. The program has been identified as one of the top 15 revenue producing programs of the college. The college offers 56 sections of this course each year with an average of 28 students per section. Eighteen of these sections have recently been offered on the campuses of local high schools. High school counselors recommend enrollment of students in the course as a way to help students with understanding college expectations, preparation for learning in college and planning their majors and careers. In most cases, high school counselors are teaching the course on their campus. As the number of high school sections increases, the numbers of younger first-time student enrolled in the course are expected to increase.

Using technology in education is identified as a necessary college success skill and it is used extensively in teaching the course. The course is offered in various formats:

- 12 sections online
- 22 sections blended
- 22 sections traditional face to face

The online courses include personality and vocational assessment, reading material, quizzes with immediate feedback, discussion boards, e-mail and instructional videos. They are taught totally online with the exception of 3 online courses for high school students that require an on campus orientation at the beginning of the semester. Blended sections are 51% face to face and 49% online. Students in the blended class complete assessment, reading materials, quizzes and journals online. Interactive exercises are completed in the classroom. Traditional face to face classes are taught in the classroom with assessment and some course materials posted online.

At the college, this comprehensive three unit course is recommended for first time college students, students who are undecided about their majors and students who are on academic probation. While exact numbers of the above groups of students enrolling in the course are not available, The District Office of Institutional Research has identified these students as high risk students who have persistence rates that are below the average of the general population. First time students are defined as students who have no college credits and are beginning college for the first time. Persistence is defined as students who return the next semester. Students are placed on academic probation if their grade point averages are below 2.0. This course has been offered at the college since 2000 and a similar course was offered from 1990 to 2000. Although this course is not required of new students, it has excellent enrollment due to several factors.

- The course has a reputation for quality and is recommended by counselors and faculty.
- The course transfers to the California State University system to meet general education requirements.
- It is the first college success course accepted as transferable to the University of California. It is required of students participating in the guaranteed transfer program for the University of California San Diego.

This comprehensive course contains student learning outcomes in the areas of:

- college success
- career success
- lifelong success

College success topics prepare students for lifelong learning in this course and future courses. Students begin with exploring their reasons for attending college and ways to motivate themselves to accomplish future goals. They learn about time management techniques to take the steps needed to accomplish these lifetime goals. Students explore their learning style and identify the learning strategies that work best for them. They practice memory techniques and apply these techniques to improving reading comprehension. The basics of note taking, test preparation and college writing skills are reviewed.

Choice of a college major and career planning are some of the most important outcomes of the course. Career success topics begin with an assessment of personality types and related careers. Based on these personal assessments, students explore careers that match their personal strengths. Students also assess their values and vocational interests. Career assessment is followed by educational planning to complete general education requirements, preparation for the major and the requirements needed to transfer to four year universities.

Lifelong success topics prepare students for future success in education, in the workplace and in their personal lives. Building on their knowledge of personality type, they increase their understanding of good communication techniques and building good relationships. The critical and creative thinking topics include identifying fallacies in reasoning, developing the critical thinking process and applying creativity techniques to generate ideas for problem resolution. Students practice critical and creative thinking techniques by applying them to current issues. Students are encouraged to maintain a healthy lifestyle over a lifetime by creating a wellness plan that includes nutrition, exercise, proper sleep, relaxation and the avoidance of addictions. Students also examine issues related to the appreciation of diversity. Lastly students examine their life stage and topics relating to positive thinking and lifetime happiness.

A detailed course outline with student learning objectives is available by clicking on Faculty Resources at www.cuyamaca.edu/collegesuccess.

IV. Research Design

Academic programs at Cuyamaca College participate in a Program Review every five years to review program and cost effectiveness. Some key questions asked include the following:

1. Does Personal Development 124, Lifelong Success (PDC 124), help students increase persistence in college? Persistence is defined as students who return the next semester.
2. Does PDC 124 help students improve their confidence in their academic skills?
3. Does PDC 124 help students choose a major?
4. What is the level of student satisfaction with the course?

To assess persistence, a comparison was made of persistence rates of all students attending Cuyamaca College, all students who enroll in PDC 124 and all students who successfully complete PDC 124. Data for this comparison was provided by the District Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Academic Services. Student satisfaction and other relevant information was obtained by surveying 198 students enrolled in PDC 124 during the Spring Semester 2003.

V. Findings

Data was analyzed to show the persistence of students who enrolled in the fall and returned in the spring (2000-2004). The data shows a greater persistence rate for students who successfully completed PDC 124. The average persistence rate from fall 2000 to spring 2004 for the entire college was 57.8 percent. The average persistence rate for all PDC students was 76.1%. The average persistence rate for students who successfully completed PDC 124 during the same period was 85.4 percent, a 26.7 percent increase over the rates for all students attending the college. The last two program reviews completed over a period of ten years have shown a consistent increase in persistence rates for students successfully completing PDC 124.

An analysis of data on student success shows a higher rate of success for students enrolled in PDC 124 as compared to the general population of Cuyamaca College. Success is defined as students who complete the class with an "A", "B", "C", or "CR". The average of all student success at the college from fall 1999 to spring 2004 was 64.76 percent as compared to 72.73 for all PDC 124 students.

The same persistence data was analyzed for first time students since approximately half of the students who enroll in PDC 124 are first time students under age 20. From fall 2000 to spring 2004, an average of 63 percent of first time Cuyamaca College students who enrolled in the fall returned for the spring. The data shows a greater persistence rate for first time students who successfully completed PDC 124. For first time students who successfully completed PDC 124, an average of 88.9 percent of students returned for the spring semester, an increase of 25.9 percent.

During the Spring Semester 2003, a survey was administered to 198 students enrolled in PDC 124. Here are some results from the survey:

- 62 percent of students said the course helped them feel more confident about their academic skills.
- 72 percent thought the course would help them to improve their grades.
- 52 percent thought that the course was helpful in making a career choice. It should be noted that many students who enroll in PDC 124 have already chosen a career and are taking the course to learn more about themselves and to improve their learning skills. Of students who have already decided on a major, the course helps them confirm choice of a major or some change their majors to better match their personal strengths.
- 88 percent of students gave PDC 124 the highest ratings of very good or good.

The Program Review showed the benefits of offering a comprehensive, three unit college success course that included a career component. The results of the Program Review show that students at Cuyamaca College taking, and successfully completing, PDC 124 have increased persistence by about 27 percent. The course helped students decide on a major and career and increase their confidence in their academic skills. Students were very satisfied with the course.

Some key elements that contribute to the success of this program include the following:

1. Transferability

Students are motivated to enroll in a course that meets graduation requirements and can be transferred to a state university system to complete a bachelor's degree. The California State University System has a general education requirement called "Lifelong Understanding and Self-Development" and the PDC 124 class has been approved to meet this requirement. It has been approved as transferable units to the University of California. The course has been approved as transferable based on these factors:

- Comprehensive course

A key to gaining acceptance of this course from four year universities is the comprehensive nature of the course. The typical college success course that focuses on study skills is not likely to be accepted as a transferable course. Universities view study skills courses as basic skills courses that are non-transferable. By adding the career and life planning components, it is more likely to be accepted as a transferable course.

- Academic level

The academic level of the course is also important in gaining acceptance from universities. Appropriate theories are introduced in the course while keeping the emphasis on practical application.

2. Career exploration

Students are motivated to take the course because they need help with career exploration and academic planning. Research completed at Cuyamaca College has shown that students are more likely to persist in their education if they have selected an appropriate major and have a clear academic goal. The complete Program Review and summaries of additional research are available by clicking on Faculty Resources at www.cuyamaca.edu/collegesuccess.

3. Institutional support

The course is successful because of the support of the administration and faculty. The primary reason that the course is supported is because the institution values student success. A secondary reason that the course is supported is because of financial reasons. There is good enrollment in the course and increased student persistence results in increased funding for the college.

4. Counseling support

Counselors have seen first hand the beneficial results of this course and recommend it during new student orientation and academic planning sessions.

5. Reputation

Since the course has been successfully offered since 1990, there are many former students who have taken the course and recommended it to others. Faculty members understand the benefits of the course and frequently recommend it to their students.

Recommendations

It is recommended that community college faculty explore the possibility of creating a three unit transferable college success course that includes topics relating to the following:

- Lifelong learning
 - Motivation
 - Time management
 - Learning style
 - Memory and reading improvement
 - Note taking
 - Test preparation
 - Writing and speaking
- Career exploration
 - Personality
 - Interests
 - Values
 - Educational planning
- Lifelong success
 - Communication and relationships
 - Critical and creative thinking
 - Appreciation of diversity
 - Understanding of life stages
 - Positive thinking

It important to gain administrative and faculty support for the course. This can be accomplished by examining institutional values related to student success, as well as looking at the financial advantages for the institution.