Introduction

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)

In summer 2011, 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. To ensure the study continues incorporating new research on this subject into its design and analysis and addresses additional questions that arise as our examination unfolds, the RP Group will treat this brief as a “living document,” periodically updating it throughout the life of the project.
This brief offers a summary of current key findings from our ongoing examination of student support research (Key Findings, p. 2), and offers an overview of the study’s approach (Research Approach, p. 7).

Key Findings

While the body of research on student support is vast, this literature review particularly focused on findings from two types of existing research: (1) studies on supports that lead to increases in students’ success, particularly for underrepresented student populations, and (2) research on how to determine the cost-effectiveness of student supports.

Defining Factors that Support Student Success

Based on the Community College Research Center’s (CCRC) 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 findings emerged. Student support activities must be:

- Integrated into students’ daily experience
- Included in the overall curriculum

According to the literature, effective support must address “the whole student” by focusing on both academic and non-academic obstacles to student success: “learning [is] a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other” (Keeling, 2004). Research suggests that, wherever possible, student support structures should be integrated and

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2 [http://datamart.cccco.edu/Outcomes/BasicSkills_Cohort_Tracker.aspx](http://datamart.cccco.edu/Outcomes/BasicSkills_Cohort_Tracker.aspx)
intrusive in students’ daily experience so that they encounter them inside and outside the classroom, in the curriculum and in their assignments (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2011; Karp, 2011; Kuh, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 1987). This integrated and comprehensive approach is supported by several studies which suggest that, in addition to students’ classroom activities, out-of-class experiences can have an important effect on their development (Cooper, 2010; Kuh, 1995; Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996).

Six Factors for Success

When reviewed collectively, this research also indicates that students are more likely to succeed when: (1) they have a goal and a path leading to this goal, (2) they stay motivated to achieve this outcome, (3) they are engaged in the classroom, (4) they feel connected to the college community, (5) they believe that their success matters to others and (6) they feel they are contributing positively to the college culture and community. The RP Group summarized these factors as “directed,” “focused,” “engaged,” “connected,” “nurtured” and “valued.” We define these factors—from the students’ perspective—as:

- **Directed**: students have a goal and know how to achieve it
- **Focused**: students stay on track—keeping their eyes on the prize
- **Engaged**: students actively participate in class and extracurricular activities
- **Connected**: students feel connected to the college
- **Nurtured**: students feel somebody wants them to succeed and helps them to do so
- **Valued**: students feel what they have to contribute to the college is valued

An examination of promising practices and approaches, coupled with insights gathered in interviews with practitioners and researchers, highlighted how these six factors for success contribute to an institutional culture where all community college students can thrive. These factors can create a positive environment—both inside and outside the classroom—that offers the support students may need to realize their educational goals. The following section provides a brief summary of research themes by success factor, including both information on how students experience these factors and what colleges can do to promote them in their learners’ experience.

**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*

Students, particularly those who enter without an educational goal, can easily get lost in the myriad of options most colleges offer. Reports from CCRC, including *The Shapeless River* (Scott-Clayton, 2011) and *How Non-Academic Supports Work* (Karp, 2011), underscore the challenges students encounter as they attempt to navigate college. The University of Southern California Center for Urban Education’s (CUE) *Equity Scorecard* (2012) adds to the CCRC perspective with its consideration of how students experience systems that are complicated, ambiguous and not developed with the customer in mind. Moreover, high school students
heading for community colleges receive far less guidance ahead of time on how to navigate college than do their peers who are headed to four-year institutions. Institutions can ameliorate these issues by directing students into pathways, providing learning communities where students move together for one or several semesters along a clearly defined path and/or helping students develop meaningful education plans that map how to get from entry to a certificate, degree or transfer. Moreover, if students cannot connect the college experience to the attainment of a goal that is important to them, they are much less likely to persist. For this reason, it is also critical that colleges help learners clarify their aspirations and develop an educational focus that they perceive as meaningful and feasible. How can this be done in a period when education budgets continue to contract? Michigan’s Macomb Community College, with support from the Kresge Foundation, is developing a web-based orientation that will provide interactive content customized to reflect students’ needs and aspirations. Accordingly, students will only receive information and direction relevant to their educational circumstances, including if they have a defined goal or not, if they are pursuing transfer or career preparation or if they are part of a special population. To supplement their web-based orientation, students will also meet with a counselor for two, 15-minute sessions (S. Jaggars, personal communication, September 18, 2012).

**Focused**

*Fostering students’ motivation and helping them develop the skills needed to achieve their goals*

In its 2011 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), CCCSE found that nine of ten students “agree or strongly agree” that they have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college. To maintain this motivation, it is important to have supports in place that continuously remind students of the big picture—that staying in college and completing a certificate or degree and/or transferring will translate into improved life opportunities. Successful programs help students “imagine their future potential self[ves]” and how their education will allow them to realize this potential (J. Pieri, personal communication, July 28, 2011). Some students might be inspired by receiving information on specific career and employment opportunities that relate to their studies. In *How Non-Academic Supports Work*, Karp (2011) emphasizes that community college students are particularly motivated by the connection between education and jobs, a point also made by other studies (Grubb, 2006). For others, finding ways to be able to "come back and do something in their community" helps them persist and succeed (J. Pieri, personal communication, July 28, 2011). In general, students may be more likely to continue from term to term and reach their goals if their education allows them to "create a unique vision for themselves" (R. Luna, personal communication, August 12, 2011). Students also need resources and tools that can help them do what is required to be academically successful such as student success courses or workshops that teach note taking, study skills and time management (O’Gara, Karp & Hughes, 2008; Zeidenberg, Jenkins & Calcagno, 2007). Inside the classroom, particular instructional strategies such as collaborative and cooperative learning offer approaches where students work in groups to collectively complete projects and assignments. Wlodkowski (1999) observed that approaches like cooperative learning foster “intrinsic motivation that develops attitude, establishes inclusion, engenders competence, and enhances meaning within diverse students.”
**Engaged**

Active involving students in meaningful and authentic educational experiences and activities inside and outside the classroom

Research indicates that engagement can be fostered both inside and outside of the classroom by faculty, peers, mentors and support service professionals alike. Similarly, programs such as Puente, Umoja and AANAPISI seek to inject into the classroom and college community environment a cultural context that makes college more welcoming and relevant to Latino, African-American, Asian-American, Native-American and Pacific Islander students. This type of support may include changes in pedagogy and curriculum that seek to increase the relevance of the educational experience and invite active participation in the classroom and beyond. At the same time, some research also notes the nuances practitioners must consider when working to cultivate student engagement. In The College Fear Factor, Cox (2009) documents the pivotal role faculty can play in assuaging students’ fears about failure and in persuading students that they are indeed capable of meeting high expectations, but also cautions that nontraditional instructional methods must be supported with clear guidelines and explicit instruction about how each task and assignment relates to the ultimate goal of achieving a passing grade. Most recently, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2012) underscores in A Matter of Degrees that engagement has to be “inescapable.” It further notes that a variety of interventions such as accelerated developmental education, first-year experiences, student success courses and learning communities can all provide a culture of support that helps students become involved in meaningful learning experiences.

**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

The more relationships students have with others, the more difficult it is for them to walk away from school. Relationships can be developed in a myriad of places—during an orientation session, in a student success course or through a learning community. Connections can form among a group of Math, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program participants who “hang-out” after class or through culturally-focused programs like Puente that help participants build their social capital by linking them to different personal and professional networks (Rodriguez, 2007). They can be forged with faculty members who have confidence that a student will be successful or whose own experience resonates with the student’s situation. A Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) 2009 report, Making Connections: Dimensions of Student Engagement, offers practitioners a number of examples for how these connections can be developed and strengthened. The literature also suggests that co-curricular activities seem to be associated with persistence (especially for students who may be less committed to their educational goals and the institution as a whole), social maturation, development of self-confidence and autonomy and increased appreciation for others’ differences and similarities (Kuh et al, 2006; Tenhouse, 2003).
Nurtured

Conveying a sense of “authentic caring” where students’ success is important and expected

An investment in students’ success and well-being—an “authentic caring” or cariño (Shears, 2010)—is a hallmark of the Puente and Umoja programs. As one practitioner described it in an interview, instructors are “dedicated to [students] shining” and view students’ success as an extension of their own success (L. Dannels, personal communication, July 29, 2011). Similarly, the Academy for College Excellence (ACE, formerly known as the Digital Bridge Academy), requires that its instructors “have more active engagement with, and knowledge of their students” (Asera, 2011, p.4). This approach integrates feelings into the classroom and provides a foundation for students to explore their beliefs about themselves as an individual and as a learner in a safe environment where their success is supported and expected. Cox’s (2009) research uncovers students’ deep fear of revealing concerns about their own lack of preparation and ability to succeed and their reticence to approach even when their instructors invite them to do so. She underscores that practitioners must proactively nurture students—rather than assume that learners in need of nurturing will come to them.

Valued

Providing students with opportunities to contribute to and enrich the college culture and community

Research indicates that student success is enhanced when learners have opportunities to add value both in the classroom and on campus and when they feel valued for these contributions. Programs such as Puente and Umoja focus on making students feel valued not only as individuals, but also as learners by incorporating rituals, content, assignments and leadership opportunities into the classroom that resonate with students’ life experiences and interests and validate them as intellectual and social contributors (Rendón, 2002; D. Colondres, personal communication, August 18, 2011). Additionally, these programs encourage students to support their peers by promoting team work and by providing opportunities for students to offer constructive feedback and input on each other’s work (Rendón, 2002). In addition to classroom-based approaches, students’ sense of worth can be fostered by tutoring peers, being elected to student government, participating in sports and involvement in student clubs—all activities that can be seen as adding value (Astin, 1993b; Kuh et al, 2006). These opportunities provide a platform for students to begin to view themselves as having a valuable role to play in the life of the institution both inside and outside the classroom (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). College becomes a place where students can positively affect how the institution does its work in an effort to improve and enhance not only their own lives, but those of their fellow students.

Determining the Cost-Effectiveness of Student Supports

California's community colleges have seen major cuts to supportive programs and services as a result of the state's fiscal crisis. In some cases, these cuts have limited students' access to more traditional support services such as one-on-one academic counseling, financial aid advisement and tutoring. At the same time these budget reductions are occurring, institutions across the state are actively working to understand and implement significant reform to student support based on
the recommendations of the Student Success Task Force. In response, many colleges have looked for alternative strategies and approaches that move beyond the traditional and common support structures and "boutique" programs that often serve only a small number of students. Group counseling, online communities, peer advising and faculty-student mentorship programs (Nelson, 1993) may be just some of the less expensive and innovative ways colleges are working to provide more students with needed guidance and assistance.

However, few studies have attempted to calculate the exact costs of student support and, therefore, the cost-effectiveness of alternative support activities and approaches. Research in this area has often focused on three strategies. The first strategy involves creating a formula or approach to calculate the costs of offering a set of classes, services or activities. For example, studies of acceleration in basic skills examined the cost savings realized when students complete fewer courses and are able to begin college-level instruction sooner (Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jaggars & Edgecombe, 2010; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd & Cullinan, 2012). The second strategy includes determining the costs to the college of student attrition or completion. This approach consists of placing "a dollar value on attrition" by examining the resources expended against the loss of tuition and other funding revenue when a student leaves an institution (Jones, 1986).

A third strategy focuses on calculating the return on investment (ROI) or downstream revenue of the positive effects of change after an intervention. While a particular program or service may cost more, that initiative could arguably be considered cost-effective as the average cost per completer or graduate may drop significantly if more students persist, complete and graduate—particularly those who historically are less likely to do so (T. Rudd, personal communication, July 21, 2011; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd & Cullinan, 2012). Building on theory of ROI, the RP Group has also proposed an "incremental revenue approach" to "estimate and account for incremental or additional annual costs and revenue associated with a given program that are incurred because the approach is different from the traditional [program] model," (Boroch et al, 2010).

**Research Approach**

In Year 1 (2011-12) of Student Support (Re)defined, the RP Group explored students’ perspectives on what they find supportive as they work toward their educational goals through surveys and focus groups conducted in 13 community colleges across California. The RP Group organized this phase of the study around the six student success factors we developed through this literature review. This research investigated how these six factors either work in isolation or in combination to impact students’ success and what factors specific student populations, including African-American and Latino learners, find particularly important to their achievement.

In Year 2 (2012-13), the study will examine community college practitioner perspectives on how to implement these essential elements of support. Of particular interest will be the identification of scalable and cost-effective strategies that show promise for facilitating persistence and completion among underrepresented students. Throughout the project, the RP Group will continuously convene stakeholders to review and respond to the findings with focused
discussions and research-guided action. Year 3 (2013-14) will emphasize dissemination of the research findings with an emphasis on taking action to improve success for all students.

For a full description of the project’s methodology, visit: http://www.rpigroup.org/content/research-framework.

**For more information:**

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

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