

Evaluation Section for FIPSE Grant

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Strategy #1, the implementation of Learning Communities, will be assessed using a variety of methods. At SCE, remedial support and basic skills enrichment is provided at a Learning Center staffed by faculty and tutors. While some students voluntarily attend the Learning center for personal development, most students attend because they are referred. Counselors may refer students based on standardized assessment scores or an evaluation of previous transcripts, or instructors may refer students who are struggling with coursework. From the pool of students that are referred for basic skills assistance to the Learning Center, students will elect to enroll in either the standard Learning Center or to a Learning Community. Because SCE's student population consists primarily of working adults, and not all students will have the time and flexibility in their schedules to devote to a learning community, random assignment will not be possible. However, attempts will be made to document any systematic differences between students enrolled in the Learning communities and students enrolled in the Learning centers. Some stratification will also be implemented to ensure that the Learning Communities contain students from the 3 major curricular tracks at SCE—Career/Technical Education (CTE) students, adult high school diploma students, and English as a Second Language (ESL) students. In the first grant year, a Learning Community will be implemented at our Anaheim campus, and in grant years 2 and 3 we hope to implement learning communities at our two other major educational centers.

Second, the primary goal of implementing the Learning Communities is an improvement in students' basic skill levels above and beyond the improvement that occurs during traditional remediation. To assess basic skill improvement, both students enrolled in the Learning Center and students participating in Learning Communities will be administered a "pre-test" on an online learning assessment software program. This pre-test is expected to yield a summary score, as well as a detailed report on students' academic strengths and weaknesses in core basic skills areas. At the end of the term, students will complete a "post-test" on the same software that will yield another summary score. Students in the Learning communities will be expected to experience a greater gain in pre- to post-test scores than other basic skills students, providing evidence that academic improvement occurred.

Because assessment scores represent only one academic indicator, additional measures will be explored to determine the extent to which learning communities have led to an improvement in basic skills. For example, student grades in their primary curricular tracks (i.e. non-developmental high school, CTE, and ESL subjects) will be examined. Students in learning communities will be expected to have higher rates of successful completion in their non-developmental courses than other basic skills students. In addition, because of the increased motivation and sense of belonging learning communities are theorized to influence, students in learning communities will be expected to have higher persistence rates than other basic skills students. Persistence will be tracked term-to-term for all basic skills students, for a one year time period. Finally, surveys will be administered to learning community faculty and to basic skills faculty. The survey will include items such as faculty perceptions' of student

engagement, student improvements in critical thinking and study skills, and perceptions of student performance and effort. Learning community faculty are expected to have higher ratings across items than other basic skills faculty, which would suggest that students experience greater learning and more positive experiences in the learning center environment than the traditional developmental education environment. These faculty surveys will be supplemented with focus groups comprised by learning community faculty. A content and theme analysis will be conducted with the qualitative data collected during focus group sessions, and results will be used to collect “best practices” and make improvements to learning communities that are implemented in future trimesters. These best practices will also be used in the dissemination of results to other institutions and the community.

Third, learning communities will be supported by several supplemental services, including online tutoring and counseling. SCE believes that providing academic and career counseling will assist with students’ motivation and help clarify student goals. Since a primary focus of continuing education schools is to transition students to community colleges and/or employment, one of the evaluation measures will consist of the extent to which counseling had beneficial consequences for the student. Specifically, we expect that as a result of counseling services, students participating in learning communities will experience greater clarification of educational and career goals. This will be assessed by a survey administered to students at the end of each term. The survey will include items probing the extent to which counseling services assisted students in clarifying their goals, and the extent to which students developed action plans for achieving their goals. Students will rate their responses on a 1-5 Likert

Scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. We will expect the average rating to be a 3.5 or higher for students in the learning communities.

Strategy #2 is the implementation of distance education (online courses) in four high schools subjects. The goal of implementing distance education is to improve accessibility to education for working adults, or adults with financial, transportation, or childcare difficulties. This goal will be assessed in several ways. First, the test scores and final grades of students enrolled in distance education courses will be examined, and success and retention rates will be reported. These success and retention rates will be compared to corresponding courses taught in the standard delivery format; for example, the success and retention rates in an online Algebra I class will be compared to the success and retention rates of standard Algebra I courses taught at SCE. We expect the rates to be similar across courses, with distance education courses exhibiting slightly higher rates of success and retention. We believe that the greater flexibility and access afforded by online courses will allow students to develop more time and attention, and in turn perform better, in the online courses.

Second, toward the end of each term, students enrolled in distance education courses will also be administered a survey. Items will include the extent to which students preferred the online format over traditional classroom formats, whether students' experienced savings in costs or commute time, whether students felt they were able to more easily fit online courses into their work schedules, students' general satisfaction, and their suggestions for improvement to online courses.

Third, all faculty teaching distance courses will participate, at the end of each term, in focus groups designed to investigate their experiences teaching online, collect

“best practices” and suggestions for improvement, and document the extent to which student learning was comparable to or improved over standard courses. We believe that gathering this feedback from both students and instructors will allow us to continue to refine our online course offerings, make improvements, and ensure that students are benefitting from the courses, both academically and in terms of accessibility.

The last two goals are that learning communities and distance education will be institutionalized and sustainable at SCE, and will influence other institutions to implement these strategies to improve students’ basic skills and increase accessibility to education for working adults. We are confident that our strategies can be institutionalized—at the end of each term, results from all evaluation measures will be reviewed and best practices will be summarized, and cost analyses will be conducted. We will make ongoing improvements to the strategies, and expect future costs to be minimal, since faculty teaching in learning communities or teaching distance education courses will be re-assigned. Since no new faculty will necessarily need to be hired, and technology costs will not be expected to increase over time, these strategies will be sustainable over the long-term.

In addition, SCE will present its findings and best practices on community college list serves, and at statewide conferences in California such as the Research and Planning Group, Community College League and Student Services conferences, as well as at the Association for Continuing and Community Education. SCE will also publicize its results and successes to the local Board of Trustees and to the county Business Council and other community partnerships.

