

# Integrating Student Support Services and Academic Instruction at Community Colleges

**Tags:** Student services, learning communities, achievement gap closure, improving achievement, persistence.

## Description of Strategy

Although student support services are critically important for promoting better academic outcomes for students, many community colleges struggle to integrate these services with academic instruction. This summary describes a number of strategies developed to bridge the gap between student support services, particularly counseling and advising functions, and academic instruction in community colleges. These strategies were developed as part of the Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative, which aimed to increase the success of young, low-income, and academically underprepared California community college students by helping community colleges find innovative ways to strengthen their support services and better align these services with academic instruction.

Nine California community colleges were selected to participate in the SSPIRE initiative, which was funded by the James Irvine Foundation and coordinated by MDRC. The colleges developed strategies that served approximately 100 to 1,000 students per year and aimed to simultaneously identify and expand promising approaches to student service integration while seeking to eventually sustain their programs with existing college revenues. Each SSPIRE college proposed its own approach to integrating services and instruction based on campus needs and objectives. The nine colleges implemented four basic approaches to integrating student services with instruction: learning communities, a “drop-in” study center, a summer bridge math program, and case management programs.

- *Learning communities* place cohorts of students into two or more courses that are linked together with shared course content. The learning community programs developed as part of the SSPIRE initiative were especially focused on creating opportunities for collaboration between student services and academic staff. For example, College of Alameda created learning communities linking academic courses with a study skills-focused counseling course and created an activity to promote awareness of campus resources. Mt. San Antonio College created a two-year learning community program with a pre-nursing/health focus, linking academic courses with a counseling course and assigning a counselor to work with learning community students. American River College restructured developmental-level reading and writing courses into a team-taught course that included study skills-focused curricula and presentations on student services. De Anza College enhanced its existing learning communities by giving faculty additional time for team curricular development and assigning counselors to work with participating students. Similarly, Santa Ana College enhanced its learning communities by providing faculty with training and coordinated time to develop strategies that integrated student services and classroom instruction.
- The *drop-in study center* created at Merced College as part of this initiative was a dedicated space on campus where students could come to study, work in small groups, or receive

guidance and/or tutoring from faculty and student peer mentors. The center also sponsored special workshops for students and faculty. About 100 students visited the center per week, and about 400 visited at least once each semester, with many returning regularly throughout the term.

- The *summer bridge math program* developed by Pasadena City College, called Math Jam, was a two-week, intensive, voluntary math review and college orientation for new students in all three levels of developmental math. Students continued in Fall Life Lines, through which they continued to meet with their Math Jam counselor and peer tutors, during the fall semester.
- *Case management programs* developed by two of the SSPIRE colleges provided targeted groups of students with personalized and structured support from counselors or advisers. Taft College established a dedicated adviser and enhanced other support services (including expanding access to computers and a summer bridge program) for migrant students through the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA) office. Victor Valley College established a dedicated counselor for students in select developmental-level math and English courses, eventually creating a new learning community. Students were provided with intensive counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers.

### **Outcomes and Evaluation of the SSPIRE Initiative**

Although SSPIRE was not designed to include a rigorous evaluation of the programs' effects, MDRC conducted research into the implementation of the initiative, and many of the participating colleges compared outcomes of students who received SSPIRE services with outcomes for other students on their campuses who had similar characteristics. The colleges' comparisons generally suggested that SSPIRE services led to modest improvements in persistence and course completion. Unlike many MDRC studies, however, the evaluation did not involve a random assignment design. This means that the two groups of students may have differed in ways that the researchers could not detect. For example, the students who chose to participate in SSPIRE programs may have been more motivated or more capable of finding the supports they need than others at the college. On the other hand, it is possible that the students targeted for SSPIRE were at particularly high risk for failure and would have fared even worse without the help of the program. Therefore, the evaluation should be interpreted as suggestive of positive results, but not clear evidence of the program's impact.

### **Costs of the SSPIRE Initiative**

Each of the SSPIRE colleges received up to \$250,000 in total from 2006 through early 2009, which they supplemented with institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and/or coordination with other grants. Cost analyses were conducted at most of the colleges, and program-specific costs are detailed in the final report on the initiative. Across the SSPIRE programs, the largest cost components tended to be associated with increased time committed by faculty and staff, illustrating the additional level of effort necessary to align student services with academic instruction. Program coordination was also a significant cost to SSPIRE programs, highlighting the importance of coordinators to bridge the gaps that exist between student services and academic faculty, staff and administrators on many community college campuses.

## Factors Contributing to Successful Implementation of SSPIRE Programs

There were several practices SSPIRE colleges put into effect that appeared to facilitate program implementation. When these practices were clearly in effect, programs tended to be well-planned and well-implemented. When they were not, programs came together more unevenly and took longer to get off the ground. These practices can be summed up in three lessons for colleges seeking to develop or enhance programs that share SSPIRE's goal of integrating support services with academic instruction:

- *Move quickly from the broad concept of “integrating services with instruction” to clear and concrete goals and program definitions.* Although SSPIRE colleges could choose from a wide variety of approaches to integrating instruction and student support, it was critically important for colleges to narrow the range of interventions to programmatic elements that were operationally feasible and financially sustainable. Some colleges did this successfully by taking incremental steps and building on existing programs and relationships. Newly created programs also benefited from establishing clear goals at the outset. Merced College, for instance, identified early on the need for a “place-based” strategy that would provide a supportive and appealing site at which students could work and interact more fluidly with instructors and other college staff. The college’s drop-in study center emerged from that initial, well-focused idea, and program leaders worked to make their goals clear to others on campus.
- *Secure the support of senior leadership and employ strong program leaders who can bridge the gaps between student services and academics.* When college leaders, particularly at the level of vice president or dean, gave attention and support to SSPIRE programs as they moved through planning and start-up, implementation proceeded more smoothly. In contrast, a lack of senior-level attention created a less supportive environment for the program and its coordinators. Senior college officials played three key roles in the implementation of SSPIRE programs: (1) They reinforced or maintained clarity about the program’s vision and aims; (2) they helped pull together other resources to augment the SSPIRE grant; and (3) they helped create formal commitments that increased the likelihood that the new programs would be sustained. The effect of the involvement of senior leaders was often amplified by the leadership skills of the program staff — coordinators in particular. Having a coordinator who was able to take initiative, identify resources (including appropriate senior leaders), and use them successfully considerably enhanced the implementation and operation of SSPIRE programs and raised the chances of the programs being sustained over time.
- *Bring instructional and student services faculty and staff together immediately and consistently, from planning and early implementation through program operation to program assessment and improvement.* The experience of the SSPIRE initiative illustrates the importance of creating opportunities for often separate faculty and staff to come together, learn from each other, better understand one another’s roles, and begin developing solutions to problems affecting their shared students. In different ways, all nine SSPIRE colleges recognized and took on this task. Three promising approaches to encouraging collaboration between instructional and student services faculty and staff emerged at the SSPIRE colleges: (1) Providing professional development activities with both instructional and student services

faculty and staff in attendance; (2) holding regular meetings that bring together staff (and often senior staff) to work across separate disciplines and divisions; and (3) working collaboratively among the academic instructors and student services faculty and staff who are directly involved in the program.

A complementary aspect of the SSPIRE initiative was enhancement of the colleges' abilities to make use of data and data analysis to enrich their understanding, guide their work in promoting student success, and begin to measure trends in student achievement. As part of the SSPIRE initiative, colleges surveyed their students using the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), began working with a statewide data sharing system, and used other data to better understand and improve their programs. From their experiences came two key lessons about the use of data. First, having instructional and student services faculty and staff review data together can benefit programs by facilitating cross-division dialogue, bringing different interpretations of data to the table, and informing program design and improvement. Second, qualitative data — particularly student voices — can often be as useful as quantitative outcome data when seeking to understand students' academic experiences and their needs for support services.

### **Suggestions for Scaling, Sustainability, and Replication**

The colleges' experiences in SSPIRE suggest that enhancing existing programs is a promising way to quickly reach larger numbers of students. For example, at De Anza and Santa Ana colleges, student support services were integrated into well-established and far-reaching learning communities, resulting in larger numbers of students served at relatively low additional cost. On the other hand, the case management programs established at Victor Valley and Taft Colleges concentrated on providing a smaller number of students with a somewhat more intensive level of interaction with program faculty and staff. This more comprehensive, individualized case management model proved difficult to expand without substantially adding staff and costs.

In addition to supporting programs and promoting student success during the grant period, an aim of SSPIRE was to produce programs and practices that would have staying power on their campuses and that would, in time, be institutionalized. As grant funding came to an end in 2009, despite statewide budgetary pressures, many programs and practices that were established as part of SSPIRE were being continued and sometimes expanded. Colleges with (1) leaders who are knowledgeable and committed to the program(s), (2) well-documented program results, and (3) a clear understanding of the program's cost and revenue implications appear to be more likely to be able to sustain their programs.

**For more information**, see Weissman, Evan, Oscar Cerna, Christian Geckler, Emily Schneider, Derek V. Price, and Thomas J. Smith. 2009. *Promoting Partnerships for Student Success: Lessons from the SSPIRE Initiative*. New York: MDRC. [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

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