



**Basic Skills** as a  
Foundation for **Student**  
**Success** in California  
Community Colleges



**BASIC SKILLS**  
INITIATIVE

**Basic Skills Initiative**

<http://www.cccbbsi.org>

**Academic Senate**

<http://www.asccc.org>

**Center for Student Success**

<http://css.rpgroup.org>

**California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office**

<http://www.cccco.edu>



**BASIC SKILLS  
INITIATIVE**

**It's all about the student**

nts!



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Equity in higher education involves three parts:  
**equity** in college preparation, **access** to college,  
and **success** in reaching college goals.\*

The Basic Skills Initiative addresses this **third** goal.

\* Bailey, T., & Smith Morest, V. (eds.) (2006). *Defending the community college equity agenda*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.

# Overview

**THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES (CCC)** is the largest system of higher education in the world, serving more than 2.5 million students in the 2005-06 academic year. The system is central to maintaining the social and economic health of the state through its certificates, degrees, and workforce and transfer preparation, and perhaps even more critical, the community colleges open the doors to higher education to all, providing more postsecondary coursework than any other higher education segment in the state. As open access institutions, these colleges address the needs of a diverse population of learners with vastly varying levels of academic preparation. Assisting the underprepared student to attain the basic skills needed to succeed in college-level work has been a core function of community colleges throughout their history. This is a major task, with 70 to 80% of students in the CCC needing work in developmental mathematics and English courses. Even with only slightly more than one in every three entering students actually enrolling in a basic skills class, this translates into nearly one-half million students enrolling in English and mathematics classes considered below college level, with additional enrollments in basic skills reading and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.



To date, efforts to address the needs of basic skills and ESL students have met with varying levels of success. While there are several exemplary programs in the California community colleges, many of them are small in scale and funded through short-term grants. The Basic Skills Initiative is an effort to bring about the ability to address basic skills and ESL needs through three things: information on effective practices, professional development to allow colleges to examine their basic skills and ESL efforts and how to improve them, and dollars to allow colleges to act on the first two.

The first step has already been completed. The Center for Student Success has conducted a thorough review of the literature and effective practices, resulting in the report entitled *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in the California Community Colleges*.

The second step is in progress. Every college in the state is currently engaging with the report to conduct a self-assessment of existing practices in basic skills and ESL. In addition to statewide conferences focused on basic skills and ESL, joint faculty- and administrative-led teams have conducted and are conducting 20 day-long regional workshops for all California community colleges in the area of developmental education. The workshops engage administration and faculty across disciplines and in student services in discussions about how to assess their current practices and how to create an action plan at their respective colleges. This training is based on *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in the California Community Colleges*, which includes a self-assessment tool to help colleges identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The third step is implementation of what colleges learn from their self-assessment and additional professional development to assist with this process. Initial funding to begin this process is already in place, and an augmentation to this funding is being requested to enable the colleges to fully implement their action plans.

The Basic Skills Initiative is a key project in addressing the goal of student success and readiness (Goal B) in the California Community Colleges System Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan emphasizes the community colleges' central role in meeting the State's social and economic needs and, in order to do so, the requirement to significantly transform the system in terms of how the colleges address and meet the needs of basic skills and ESL students. The requirements to effect organizational change are being met through a close collaboration of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, Chief Instructional Officers, Chief Student Services Officers, Chief Executive Officers, and the System Office. In the process, all major groups have clearly articulated why the colleges need to take steps to improve basic skills and ESL and why they need to move forward without delay.

Similar collaborations among constituencies on individual college campuses are fostering renewed energy and commitment to meeting the challenges of improving student learning in basic skills and ESL and extending the use of effective practices to the full range of college programs and services. The level of interest that this project and the related statewide and local initiatives have already generated clearly suggests that California community colleges are beginning a new chapter in their efforts to provide a major pathway to higher education for all students.

# A Summary of Literature and Effective Practices

**THIS BROCHURE REPRESENTS A SYNTHESIS** of the findings in *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in the California Community Colleges*. The entire publication can be found at <http://www.cccbsi.org/publications>. For the purposes of this study, these working definitions were established:

Basic skills are those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, learning skills, study skills, and English as a Second Language<sup>1</sup> which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work.

In order to establish criteria for “effective practices,” this document adopted a variation of Hunter Boylan’s definition of best practice, modified as follows:

“Effective practices” refer to organizational, administrative, instructional, or support activities engaged in by highly successful programs, as validated by research and literature sources relating to developmental education.

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<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of English as a Second Language in this definition recognizes that all ESL is not, by definition, subsumed under basic skills. To the extent that a student is unable to succeed in college-level coursework due to inability to write, speak, read, or comprehend English, ESL skills may be considered as foundation skills in accordance with the definition.

# Study Components

1. **An extensive review of literature related to basic skills practices, as well as an overview of examples of strategies employed by thirty-three California Community Colleges as well as nine out-of-state institutions.**

The literature review references over 250 sources, making this the most comprehensive basic skills study conducted in California Community Colleges to date. A multitude of researchers and organizations commonly identify a consistent set of elements that characterize effective programs.

A total of 26 practices are outlined under four major categories in the literature review: organizational and administrative practices (including choices regarding structure, management, and organization); program components (including a number of specific services and policies); staff development (outlining the importance of strong training and support components); instructional practices (exploring highly effective pedagogical techniques). These practices are included in summary within this document.

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**2. A self-assessment tool designed to engage college administrators, faculty and staff in a meaningful and reflective dialogue about their current practices and plans for program improvement, enhancement, or modification.**

The self-assessment tool is directly linked to the findings of the literature review. It is organized around the four major areas and the twenty-six effective practices. The tool also contains a variety of suggested strategies for accomplishing each practice, as well as a series of prompts that will assist institutions with evaluating their current progress to each effective practice. A matrix is included for each section to allow colleges to develop a plan for changes, enhancements, or modifications. The purpose of the self-assessment tool is to allow colleges to determine how their current practices fit with and reflect the findings from the literature regarding what are known to be effective practices for basic skills students.

**3. A cost-revenue model for developmental education programs providing a way for exploring the incremental revenues that can be derived over time from effective basic skills programs, practices, and/or interventions.**

Interventions or programs targeting underprepared students at the community college are characterized by their limited scope and concerns for their expense. The literature review outlines the paths toward a paradigm shift in basic skills instruction. The cost-revenue model explores the ways this paradigm shift can be fiscally responsible. In many cases, the research indicates that these programs may, in fact, pay for themselves or even result in a net benefit. The goal of this section is to provide a different way of thinking about the cost of these alternate developmental education programs.

# Findings from the Literature

**THERE IS CLEAR EVIDENCE THAT** certain practices work and that we have the tools to more effectively meet our mission for all students. At the same time, there is no expectation that colleges will assume all of these practices. Each college will need to rigorously review its programs and services and develop and implement action plans designed to improve outcomes within the college's instructional, support services, and organizational structures. In fact, the active engagement of a broadly representative group of faculty and staff in the self-assessment, planning, and implementation process is probably the most crucial first step toward improving practices to be advocated in this brochure.

Fundamentally, these are models for good practice in every aspect of the community college environment. The effective practices described in this brochure include a broad range of approaches to classroom pedagogy and institutional efforts that result in greater student success. The students in basic skills programs become the students in transfer and occupational programs, and frequently those students are concurrently enrolled in developmental and college-level course work. Equally important, the students who enter college with better preparation for college-level studies are no less in need of the effective instructional methodologies than the students entering with less developed skills, which emphasizes the philosophy that all learning is developmental.

***we have the tools to more  
effectively meet our mission  
for all students***



Too frequently, efforts to identify effective practices in basic skills resemble the search for a “magic pill:” a practice or set of practices that will completely change the outcomes of developmental education and instantly produce radically improved outcomes using standard measures of success such as pass rates or subsequent course success rates. However, the research on successful practices suggests that, in general, changes in success rates are incremental. Studies commonly report increases of 5 to 15 % as an indication of success. They advocate building on these incremental changes over a long period of time to improve the long-range success measures of program completion, degree attainment, and transfer. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect that any combination of the effective practices described below will create large changes in success rates in a short period of time. However, the literature does show that sustained efforts over extended periods of time do transform institutions, and student success rates do improve over time.

# Summary of Practices

## A. Organizational and Administrative Practices

Institutional choices concerning structure, organization and management have been related to the overall effectiveness of developmental education programs. The following effective practices have been identified in this area.

- A1 Developmental education is a clearly stated institutional priority.
- A2 A clearly articulated mission based on a shared, overarching philosophy drives the developmental education program. Clearly specified goals and objectives are established for developmental courses and programs.
- A3 The developmental education program is centralized or is highly coordinated.
- A4 Institutional policies facilitate student completion of necessary developmental coursework as early as possible in the educational sequence.
- A5 A comprehensive system of support services exists, and is characterized by a high degree of integration among academic and student support services.

- A6** Faculty who are both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about developmental education are recruited and hired to teach in the program.
- A7** Institutions manage faculty and student expectations regarding developmental education.

## **B. Program Components**

According to the literature, a number of specific programmatic components are characteristic of highly effective developmental education programs.

- B1** Orientation, assessment, and placement are mandatory for all new students.
- B2** Regular program evaluations are conducted, results are disseminated widely, and data are used to improve practice.
- B3** Counseling support provided is substantial, accessible, and integrated with academic courses/programs.
- B4** Financial aid is disseminated to support developmental students. Mechanisms exist to ensure that developmental students are aware of such opportunities, and are provided with assistance to apply for and acquire financial aid.

## C. Staff Development

According to the literature, the importance of comprehensive training and development opportunities for faculty and staff who work with developmental students cannot be underestimated. Programs with a strong professional development component have been shown to yield better student retention rates and better student performance in developmental courses than those without such an emphasis. Specific training is one of the leading variables contributing to the success of a variety of components of developmental instruction, including tutoring, advising, and instruction.

- C1** Administrators support and encourage faculty development in basic skills, and the improvement of teaching and learning is connected to the institutional mission.
- C2** The faculty play a primary role in needs assessment, planning, and implementation of staff development programs and activities in support of basic skills programs.
- C3** Staff development programs are structured and appropriately supported to sustain them as ongoing efforts related to institutional goals for the improvement of teaching and learning.
- C4** Staff development opportunities are flexible, varied, and responsive to developmental needs of individual faculty, diverse student populations, and coordinated programs/services.

- C5** Faculty development is clearly connected to intrinsic and extrinsic faculty reward structures.

#### **D. Instructional Practices**

Effective instructional practices are the key to achieving desired student outcomes for developmental programs. Research has linked the following instructional practices with success for developmental learners.

- D1** Sound principles of learning theory are applied in the design and delivery of courses in the developmental program.
- D2** Curricula and practices that have proven to be effective within specific disciplines are employed.
- D3** The developmental education program addresses holistic development of all aspects of the student. Attention is paid to the social and emotional development of the students as well as to their cognitive growth.
- D4** Culturally Responsive Teaching theory and practices are applied to all aspects of the developmental instructional programs and services.
- D5** A high degree of structure is provided in developmental education courses.
- D6** Developmental education faculty employ a variety of instructional methods to accommodate student diversity.

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- D7** Programs align entry/exit skills among levels and link course content to college-level performance requirements.
  - D8** Developmental education faculty routinely share instructional strategies.
  - D9** Faculty and advisors closely monitor student performance.
  - D10** Programs provide comprehensive academic support mechanisms, including the use of trained tutors.

# Developing Effective Action Plans through College-wide Dialogue on ESL/Basic Skills

**THE KEY TO DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE** Action Plans is conducting a college-wide dialogue on basic skills, using the “Review of the Literature and Effective Practices” and the “Assessment Tool for Effective Practices” sections of *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in California Community Colleges*. A self-assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and services directed at students with developmental needs in basic skills should serve as the basis for a “gap analysis” that analyzes the discrepancies in the status between current college organization, programs and services and effective practices identified through the local dialogue. That analysis should result in an action plan for increasing student success in basic skills and beyond.

In the “Review of the Literature and Effective Practices,” findings are grouped in four areas: Organization/Administrative Practices, Program Components, Faculty and Staff Development, and Instructional Practices. College-wide dialogue on basic skills should be informed by the use of the self-assessment tool, which reflects the effective practices described in the literature. Using the self-assessment tool to guide college-wide dialogue on basic skills demands that all participants read the literature review, and the expectation is that faculty, staff, and administrators representing the entire college community participate in the college-wide dialogue.

Colleges should explore local approaches to organizing college-wide dialogue, recognizing that acceptable action plans are informed by the use of the literature review and self-assessment tool by an inclusive cross section of all college stakeholders. (A fundamental principle underlying effective practices in basic skills is that the basic skills challenge is the responsibility of all faculty, staff and administrators, not just those responsible for reading, writing, mathematics and ESL.) A common approach to organizing college-wide dialogue is through the use of focus groups. Often coordinated through a college-wide steering committee on basic skills, focus groups may reflect cross sections of college stakeholders who are assigned all or some sections of the literature review and attendant sections of the self-assessment tool. Collecting input from multiple focus groups over a period of time allows a steering committee (or other leadership structure) to adjust questions and dialogue as the process evolves. Using multiple focus groups also encourages the formation of multiple, independent perspectives and responses, which, when synthesized, can bring greater validity and credibility to overall conclusions and, ultimately, to the action plan. Again, colleges should develop approaches to the self-assessment process that make sense in the contexts of individual campus cultures and climates.

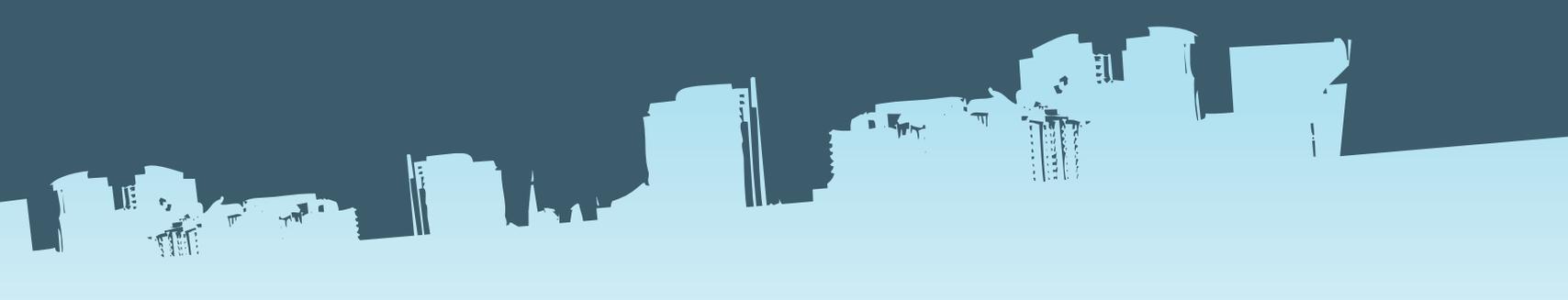
Following the college-wide dialogue and using the results of the self-assessment, each college will develop an action plan using the template provided by the System Office. On the Action Plan template, the college should first define several long-term goals (five years) for ESL/basic skills. The college should then specify planned actions for 2007-08, and annually thereafter, that will lead to the realization of those long-term goals. For each planned action, the college should cite an effective practice from the literature review, as indicated on the template. Also, the college will identify a targeted completion date and person(s) responsible for each planned action. It is important to include on the template those planned actions that will not require

new funds as well as those planned that require new funds for implementation. Reflecting a key finding from the review of the literature, colleges are encouraged to develop and note planned actions that involve close integration of instruction and student support services.

Based on the planned actions specified on the Action Plan template, each college will complete an Expenditure Plan. Colleges should enter estimated amounts for planned actions that require new funds. These amounts should be entered in the categories specified in the Expenditure Plan, which were drawn directly from the 2007-2008 Budget Bill. The specific categories identified include the following:

- program and curriculum planning and development,
- student assessment,
- advisement and counseling services,
- supplemental instruction and tutoring,
- articulation,
- instructional materials and equipment, and
- any other purpose directly related to the enhancement of ESL/basic skills instruction and related student services support.

Each college will estimate the amount of funds it will use in these categories to support its selected activities/planned actions that require new funds. Colleges are not required to specify an amount in each category. Rather, colleges should specify amounts for those categories in which selected planned actions can be placed. The total amount entered on the Expenditure Plan should equal, but not exceed, a college's total allocation.



## Acknowledgements

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