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Promoting Partnerships for Student Success

Lessons from the SSPIRE Initiative

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California's 110 community colleges are an essential part of the state's higher education and workforce development structure, serving over 2.6 million students annually. But a growing number of students face major obstacles to success, including inadequate preparation for college-level courses and competing work and family obligations. As a result, many students drop out of college before they attain the credentials necessary to reach the next step in their education or to compete successfully in the labor market. Of California community college students seeking a degree or certificate, only about one-quarter receive their degree or certificate, or transfer to a four-year college, within six years.

Across the nation, policymakers and educators are rightly concerned about strategies to improve instruction — particularly in developmental English and mathematics courses, where many students struggle to learn basic skills needed for college. But new scholarship suggests that, to be most effective, support for developmental-level learners should not be limited to the classroom. Student support services, such as academic and personal advising, counseling, tutoring, and financial aid, are also critically important for promoting better outcomes for students. The challenge is to integrate these support services with academic instruction. Unfortunately, the very way most community colleges are organized — with student services housed in one division and academic functions in another, each functioning in parallel but with little coordination — creates obstacles to successful integration. These obstacles are often exacerbated by competition between the divisions for limited budget resources.

To help overcome this divide, the Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative was funded by the James Irvine Foundation and coordinated by MDRC. SSPIRE aimed to increase the success of young, low-income, and academically underprepared California community college students by helping community colleges strengthen their support services and better integrate these services with academic instruction. Following a competitive process, nine California community colleges[1] were selected to participate in SSPIRE, and each received as much as $250,000 in total from 2006 through early 2009.

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[1]The nine community colleges were: American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Merced College, Mt. San Antonio College, Pasadena City College, Santa Ana College, Taft College, and Victor Valley College.

There was no uniform SSPIRE program; rather, each college proposed its own approach to integrate student services and instruction, based on campus needs and objectives.

Throughout the three-year grant period, MDRC provided the colleges with technical assistance to help them implement their programs, conduct data-based assessments, and make needed program improvements. MDRC also organized annual meetings and other opportunities for faculty and staff from all nine colleges to learn from the efforts of other colleges. SSPIRE can be characterized as a pilot initiative, in which the grant to each college was meant to support an innovative program and promising practices that could serve as models of integration on the campus. The grant funds enabled each college to support strategies that served approximately 100 to 1,000 students per year and to simultaneously identify and expand promising practices and look for ways to sustain their programs with existing college revenues.

This report documents each of the SSPIRE colleges' program practices and experiences; presents some of their own data documenting students' experiences and academic progress during and after the program; and offers cross-cutting lessons drawn from MDRC's research. It focuses on how the colleges developed their programs; used student data to plan, assess, and improve their interventions; and planned for sustaining their efforts after the SSPIRE funding ended. The primary sources of data for the report are MDRC's structured interviews with faculty, staff, and students; observations of the programs; and ongoing communications with the program coordinators. Some quantitative data were also collected to supplement these qualitative findings.

What Programs Did the SSPIRE Colleges Develop?

The nine SSPIRE colleges implemented four basic approaches to integrating student services with instruction: learning communities, a "drop-in" study center, a summer math program, and case management programs (see Table ES.1). Each college supplemented the SSPIRE funding with contributions of its own, and all of the colleges reached disadvantaged students on their campuses, an important goal of the initiative.

- **The most popular approach (used by five colleges) was learning communities, in which cohorts of students take two or more courses that are linked together, with shared curriculum and course content.**

American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Mt. San Antonio College, and Santa Ana College integrated student services into learning community classrooms in two ways. In the first model, two or more academic courses were linked in learning communities, and colleges then modified curricula to incorporate student services and assigned counselors and others to work with students in the courses. For example, a writing instructor would invite a counselor to talk to a class about the college's support services, and students would then

Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

Table ES.1

SSPIRE College Program Approaches

Learning Community Programs

American River College restructured developmental-level reading and writing courses into a single, team-taught, 6-unit course that integrates reading, writing, and study skills and that includes presentations about student services in the classroom. About 120 students per year enrolled in the new courses.

College of Alameda created new learning communities linking two or more academic courses with a counseling course focused on study skills and service-learning and created "Passport to Success," an activity that requires students to visit the campus Learning Resources Center and take advantage of faculty and counselor office hours. About 50 students per year enrolled in the new learning communities.

De Anza College enhanced its learning communities program by giving faculty additional time for team curricular development and by assigning counselors to work directly with learning communities' students and classrooms. Up to 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

Mt. San Antonio College created a two-year, sequential, learning community with a pre-nursing/health focus. Academic courses (math and English in the first year, science in the second year) are linked to a counseling course, and a counselor is assigned to work closely with learning community students. About 75 students per year were enrolled in the new learning community.

Santa Ana College enhanced its learning communities by providing faculty with training and coordinated time to develop strategies that integrate student services and classroom instruction. Faculty training also includes metacognitive techniques — helping faculty and their students think about how they think and learn. About 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

Case Management Programs

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. The adviser typically had a caseload of around 100 students.

Victor Valley College established a dedicated counselor for students in select developmental-level math and English courses; eventually creating a new learning community. Students are provided with intensive counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers. The counselor typically had a caseload of fewer than 200 students.

Other Types of Programs

Merced College created Study Central, a dedicated space on campus where students come to study, work in small groups, or receive guidance and/or tutoring from faculty and student peer mentors. Study Central also sponsors special workshops for students and faculty. About 100 students visited Study Central per week, and about 400 visited at least once each semester (with many returning regularly throughout the term).

Pasadena City College created summer Math Jam — a two-week, intensive, voluntary math review and college orientation — for new students assessed at all three levels of developmental math. Students then continue in Fall Life Lines, a component in which students meet with their Math Jam counselor and peer tutors in the fall semester. About 100 students participated in Math Jam each summer.

SOURCE: MDRC field research.

write an essay describing one of these services. In the second model, colleges linked a counselor-taught "student success" course with an academic course: An academic instructor and a counseling instructor would work together to create joint assignments that related directly to the content in both classes, such as a math assignment based on students' financial aid applications.

Having academic instructors and counselors work collaboratively throughout the planning and teaching of learning communities was generally more difficult than the program planners originally envisioned. MDRC's research suggested that this important collaboration was most likely to occur when a counselor-taught course was linked to an academic course. Most of the colleges promoted collaboration by compensating their faculty for the extra time required to work with their partners, sit in on each others' class, and coordinate across divisions. In fact, this was the single largest cost element of running SSPIRE at most of the colleges with learning communities.

This report provides a detailed look at a program assessment conducted by De Anza College, one of the SSPIRE colleges with the most experience in running learning communities. De Anza offered learning communities that had a range of courses; some included a student success course taught by a counselor, while others incorporated student services into two linked academic courses. The college compared the outcomes for students in its developmental-level reading and writing learning communities with those of students who took similar "stand-alone" courses. Because the characteristics and motivation levels of students in the two groups may be different, the results must be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, the college found evidence of modest increases in course pass rates and persistence for students who took developmental reading and writing learning communities. These findings were roughly comparable with those detected in other studies of learning communities by Vincent Tinto (a Syracuse University professor and leading proponent of learning communities) and MDRC.

- **One college developed a "drop-in center," where students receive academic assistance, guidance, or student service referrals from faculty, staff, and student peer guides.**

Merced College created Study Central as an informal drop-in center at the front of the student cafeteria, where students seek assistance from faculty and student peer guides in a range of academic and other areas. It was expanded to also include occasional academic workshops and more focused individual assistance in writing. The largest single cost at Merced's drop-in center was the pay to the regular classroom instructors who kept the center open about 25 hours per week. Their presence ensured that Study Central not only offered a range of supports and referrals to students, but also gave students more opportunity to interact with faculty outside of the classroom.

Merced's SSPIRE coordinators used data to support their program in several ways. For instance, the college participated in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and discovered that their college fell below national norms on academic advising, tutoring, and other supports to students. The college used the results to promote dialogue among faculty and staff on how they could become more responsive to students' needs. The college also compared the academic outcomes of students who attended Study Central with those of a group of students who did not. Though it is likely that Study Central participants represented a more motivated group than the nonparticipants, college administrators were encouraged by results showing that their pass rates in developmental English and math courses and their persistence rates were higher. The findings helped build support for institutionalizing Study Central at the college.

- **Another college created a two-week, not-for-credit summer math program, with counseling and tutorial follow-up in the fall.**

Pasadena City College's summer "bridge" program, called "Math Jam," offered math review along with college orientation and additional support services for recent high school graduates in need of developmental math. In addition to math instructors, a team of tutor/mentors and a counselor provided continued academic support, student services, and personalized attention to many of the students as they moved into their first semester of college. The biggest cost of the program was the salaries for the tutor/mentors, followed closely by the administrative costs of planning and coordinating the summer program. Math Jam also paid for math textbooks for students who enrolled in the fall.

Many students had a positive experience in the two-week summer program and went on to enroll and persist at the college; however, Pasadena's own assessment suggested that the program was not producing high enough pass rates for these low-skilled students when they enrolled in math courses in the fall. In response, Pasadena added math workshops throughout the school year and began scheduling students to meet more often with the counselor and tutor/mentors in the fall semester.

- **Two colleges developed case management programs that provided targeted groups of students with personalized and structured support from counselors or advisers.**

Taft College and Victor Valley College offered direct support to their most struggling and often underserved student populations. The SSPIRE program at Taft targeted Hispanic students, especially those from migrant families. At Victor Valley, students who tested into developmental-level English and math courses were targeted for services. Program funds were used primarily to pay the faculty and staff who worked directly with SSPIRE students. Whereas regular college counselors typically have caseloads of approximately 1,000 students, the

SSPIRE counselors and advisers worked with less than 200 students at any time. This enabled them to give students personalized attention and to be more proactive in scheduling meetings and conducting outreach. While these case management approaches offered important supports to the students served, they also appeared to be less conducive than other SSPIRE programs to being "scaled up" without significant increased funding.

- **All the colleges delivered services to a relatively modest number of students, who were generally more disadvantaged than an average student on the campus.**

Consistent with the goals of the initiative, the SSPIRE programs targeted their efforts toward young, low-income, and academically underprepared students. The colleges served groups of students who were more often in developmental-level courses, more likely to be from underrepresented minority groups, and younger than the average students on the campuses. The programs ranged in size, with most colleges serving no more than a few hundred students per year. Two of the colleges served around 1,000 students per year — by expanding programs that were already well established, rather than by creating wholly new programs and practices.

Lessons from Well-Implemented Programs

As expected, the SSPIRE colleges confronted head-on the problem of institutional "silos," with student services and academic functions typically housed in separate divisions, making collaboration and coordination difficult. As a result, some colleges had more success integrating services and instruction than others. Some programs were launched and operated as designed; others came together more unevenly and took longer to get off the ground. MDRC's observations of the colleges' experiences over the three-year grant period reveal several lessons from the programs that were implemented the most smoothly:

- **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.**

Not surprisingly, the most successful colleges created opportunities for faculty and staff from both instruction and student services to come together, learn from each other, better understand one another's roles, and begin to develop solutions to problems affecting their shared students. This kind of collaboration required diligence and planning. Several SSPIRE colleges developed program coordination teams from both academic and counseling divisions; because these faculty and staff typically did not have a history of working together, it was often challenging to bring them together. But coordination teams are only the beginning: Actual collaborative activities — in professional development, direct instruction, and the delivery of

services — must also be developed. Whenever possible, faculty and staff should be compensated for their time in these activities.

- **Move quickly from the broad concept of "integrating services with instruction" to clear and concrete goals and program definitions.**

SSPIRE colleges that attempted to take on too many tasks at once or set diffuse goals had difficulty developing and launching their programs. The colleges were most successful when they narrowed their program definition and scope to an easily understandable and operationally feasible level, which could then be clearly communicated to others at the college. For instance, the college that developed a drop-in center had the clear goal of providing students with a supportive environment and connecting them with faculty and staff, and made clear to others on campus that this was its purpose.

- **Secure the support of senior leadership and employ strong program leaders who can bridge the gaps between student services and academics.**

In the best cases, vice presidents and deans played three key roles across divisions and departments: (1) reinforcing clarity about the program's vision and aims; (2) pulling together resources to augment the SSPIRE grant; and (3) helping create formal commitments to increase the likelihood that the new programs would be sustained. In addition, many of the SSPIRE colleges invested a large portion of their program funding in hiring program coordinators who were able to promote their program and recruit partners and supporters from other divisions on campus.

Using Data to Understand Student Progress

The SSPIRE initiative was not just focused on integrating student services with academic instruction; it was also about encouraging colleges to analyze quantitative and qualitative data to assess and improve their programs. The colleges looked at whether their programs were implemented as designed, which students they served, and how well the programs met students' needs — with the goal of using this evidence to inform decisions about improving the interventions. This type of assessment, which evaluators often refer to as "formative," is well suited to new programs like SSPIRE. The colleges used a variety of data sources, including institutional data, focus groups, student surveys from the national CCSSE, and a statewide data system, California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS). Several lessons emerged from this work:

- **Having instructional and student services faculty and staff review data together can spark dialogue, challenge conventional thinking, and lead to program improvements.**

The process of reviewing data can spark useful dialogue at the college, in particular when faculty and staff from both instructional and student services divisions share their interpretations of the data. For example, at one college, the coordinating team, which tracked the success rates of their program, saw that students who were encouraged to enroll in higher-level courses often failed. As a result, students were no longer encouraged to attempt the more challenging courses; instead, program services were bolstered to provide more supports to these students.

- **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.**

Classroom observations, focus groups, and other tools for learning about students' and faculty's experiences and opinions often revealed important insights that could not be found in quantitative outcome data. In several instances, surveys and focus groups exposed differences in the ways that students and faculty viewed their classroom experiences and the availability of supports on campus. Several colleges used these findings to fuel discussions and contribute to professional development of faculty and staff in their SSPIRE programs. For instance, one college had a facilitator meet with students in their learning community classrooms, and then convey students' feedback to the instructors to help them meet their students' needs.

- **Several of the colleges found suggestive evidence of student success and persistence, which they attributed to their SSPIRE programs.**

Many of the SSPIRE programs compared academic outcomes for students who received SSPIRE services with outcomes for other students on their campuses who had similar characteristics. The results generally suggested that SSPIRE services led to modest improvements in persistence and course completion. However, these program results must be interpreted carefully and with regard to the characteristics of the students whom they serve. For instance, the students who chose to participate in these programs may have been more motivated or more capable of finding the supports they need than others at the college. On the other hand, students in one SSPIRE program had surprisingly low success rates. 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.

The best solution to these methodological problems is to conduct a random assignment study, in which a group of students is divided at random (much like a coin toss) into either a program group that receives a special program like SSPIRE, or a control group that does not. With a large enough sample, random assignment ensures that the demographic characteristics and motivation levels of both groups are similar at the start of the study; hence, any subsequent differences in outcomes can be attributed to the program. It was never envisioned that SSPIRE would conduct this type of evaluation, in part because most of the programs were new and were

serving relatively small numbers of students. As policymakers and practitioners look for more definitive evidence on the effectiveness of program strategies to improve student success — and as the SSPIRE programs mature and serve more students — random assignment could be considered in the future.

What's Next for the SSPIRE Colleges?

Funding from SSPIRE ended in early 2009, but the programs and practices it fostered continue to have a presence at each college — which was an important goal of the initiative. Some of the SSPIRE colleges' programs continue to operate with other sources of funding. At other colleges, the formal programs have ended but certain aspects of SSPIRE have been incorporated into other programs and practices on the campus. In some cases, the integration of student services and academic instruction that took place in the programs — and the collaborative relationships that developed — have led to new ways of working together across disciplines and between instructional and student services divisions. For example, several colleges created new learning communities linking a counselor-taught student success course with an academic course. With the end of SSPIRE, these learning communities are still being offered, and the counselors and academic instructors are continuing to develop new ways of providing students with the instruction and supports they need.

The ability of colleges to sustain their most promising SSPIRE practices beyond the life of the grant was strengthened when program coordinators could document their program results and when they had a comprehensive understanding of the program's cost and revenue implications. For example, several SSPIRE program coordinators used data suggesting improved student persistence rates to convince senior leaders that continuing their programs would help hold or expand the student census, often a revenue-generator for colleges.

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Policymakers and the general public increasingly recognize the essential role that community colleges play in providing low-income and underprepared students with the skills they need to obtain degrees and succeed in today's labor market. The colleges in the SSPIRE initiative sought to address some of the particular obstacles these students face by better integrating student services with academic instruction — a challenge for many institutions of higher education. Though the changes the SSPIRE colleges made were mostly incremental, the initiative resulted in new programs and practices on each of the campuses. By documenting their experiences, this report offers hope that the integration of student services and academic instruction is possible, if not always easy, to achieve. Most important, it offers hope that more students at these California colleges and elsewhere will receive the information, guidance, and support they need to persist in college and reach their academic goals.