KEEPING STUDENTS ON COURSE

An Impact Study of a Student Success Course at Guilford Technical Community College

Executive Summary

Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow
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April 2012

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Overview

Improving the success of academically underprepared students who are in need of developmental (or remedial) education is a key challenge facing community colleges today. Many of these students enter college with little awareness of these institutions' expectations or a clear model for how to make effective decisions about their academic careers. To help students address these challenges, a number of colleges across the country have looked to success courses (also called study skills, student development, or new student orientation courses). This report analyzes a success course for developmental education students at Guilford Technical Community College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and its impact on students' psychosocial skills and behaviors and academic achievement.

After joining Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count in 2004, a national organization designed to mentor colleges through an institutionwide, student success-oriented improvement process, Guilford chose to offer a revised version of its student success course to developmental education students, aimed at improving psychosocial awareness and academic achievement. Modeled on Skip Downing's *On Course* philosophy and curriculum, it placed an intensive focus on changing students' behaviors and attitudes, including increasing their awareness of their and others' emotions, understanding their own learning styles, improving time management skills, and recognizing their responsibility for their own learning. Guilford hoped that these changes in students' personal habits and behaviors might help them take better control of their academic lives, which would ultimately result in gains in achievement.

This study employed random assignment methodology to examine the impact of Guilford's success course. The key findings presented in this report are:

- Guilford's implementation of its student success course stayed true to the *On Course* philosophy, with a strong emphasis on improving students' psychosocial skills and habits.
- Challenges emerged during the study in maintaining instructors' enthusiasm for teaching the course.
- The course had a positive impact on students' self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, interest in lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, and engagement in college among students with low levels of these attributes.
- But the gains in efficacy did not lead to meaningful effects on students' academic achievement during the program semester or in postprogram semesters. Despite the absence of an overall effect, the program did have positive effects on the first cohort of students enrolled in the study, with students demonstrating improved grades, retention in college, and credits earned.

The results of this study reveal that improvements in students' attitudes and behaviors may not necessarily translate easily into better academic outcomes, though the strength of program implementation may play an important role in these effects. Additionally, the program's limited effects suggest that community colleges should look to more comprehensive ways of improving developmental education students' academic achievement, including reforms in developmental education instruction.

Preface

Community colleges have long been a crucial pathway into the middle class for low-income students who face barriers to education. However, these institutions also face a number of challenges in helping their students succeed, including historically low graduation rates and large numbers of students who enter college academically underprepared. The majority of community college students are often required to take a lengthy series of developmental, or remedial, education classes. Many never successfully progress through preparatory classes into a college-level curriculum.

Given these challenges, many community colleges are experimenting with new methods for improving developmental education students' outcomes. Student success courses — also known as student development, study skills, or student orientation courses — are one popular method colleges have used to try to improve students' understanding of college and their ability to navigate their way through school. This study, which analyzes the impacts of a student success course on developmental education students' achievement at Guilford Technical Community College, provides one look at how these courses affect students' achievement.

The findings from this study reveal that Guilford's success course was able to foster some changes in students' attitudes and perspectives, such as their self-management, self-awareness, interest in lifelong learning, and engagement in college. Unfortunately, these improvements did not translate into improved academic outcomes for the overall group of students to whom the course was offered.

Although the positive effects on the first cohort's academic achievement are intriguing, the absence of an overall effect lends a more critical perspective on student success courses than have other recent quasi-experimental and experimental studies. While these courses have had a modest effect on student outcomes when paired with tutoring (as in Chaffey College's Opening Doors program) or in learning communities (as at Kingsborough Community College), this study suggests that they may have more limited value when offered without such supports.

While success courses may provide a positive benefit to students' understanding of college and its expectations, such courses may need to be more limited or integrated within larger structural changes in developmental education to improve students' academic progress.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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MDRC appreciates the cooperation of Guilford Technical Community College in writing this report. In particular, we thank Donald Cameron, Kathy Baker-Smith, Jacqueline Pettiford, Karen Ritter, Mary West, Angela Leak, and Sharon Pratt for helping us learn about their success course and playing such an integral role in setting up the study on site. We would also like to thank all of the faculty, staff, and students who met with us in focus groups and interviews to help us understand how Guilford's success course had affected their experiences at the college.

We are thankful to the many people who read and reviewed this report. We are also thankful for the written comments received from Thomas Brock, John Hutchins, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Sue Scrivener, Colleen Sommo, and Michael Weiss, at MDRC.

Finally, we thank MDRC's publications staff. Margaret Bald edited the report, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Thousands of community college students across the country confront serious questions every day about their course-taking and career choices. They often are required to make key decisions relatively quickly, often with little introduction to how to make these choices most effectively. To further complicate matters, most community college students enter college academically underprepared and are required to take developmental, or remedial, English, math, and/or reading courses in order to advance to a college-level curriculum.[1]

Many colleges have looked to success courses,[2] which seek to orient students to college life and assist them in making important decisions about college and their careers, as a way to help students address these challenges. In 2005, Guilford Technical Community College in Greensboro, North Carolina, joined many colleges across the nation in developing a success course for developmental education students as one of their strategies under the auspices of the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative. Achieving the Dream is a national organization designed to mentor colleges through an institutionwide, data-driven, student success-oriented improvement process.[3] Along with developing students' study habits, Guilford's student success course placed an intensive focus on improving students' psychosocial and soft skills, such as their awareness of their and others' emotions, understanding of their own learning style, improved time management, and a recognition of their responsibility for their own learning. Guilford hoped that changing students' personal habits and attitudes might help them take better control of their academic lives and improve their overall achievement.

This report analyzes the impact of Guilford's success course on developmental education students' academic achievement as well as several social and psychological measures, including motivation, self-concept, and commitment to college. In sum, this study found that the success course had few effects on students' academic achievement, though the evidence suggests that there were some positive, differential effects for students in the first group to enter the study. The success course was also found to have a positive impact on several psychosocial outcomes, including students' self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, interest in lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, belief in self, and positive engagement in college.

[1] Adelman (2004); Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006); Bailey, Joeng, and Cho (2010).
[2] These courses are also termed study skills, student development, or new student orientation courses.
[3] Achieving the Dream (2009).

Guilford's Student Success Course

Student success courses have become a popular strategy for increasing students' achievement in community colleges throughout the country.[4] Guilford was particularly drawn to improving its developmental education students' success rate after noting their poor academic performance in the college's Achieving the Dream data analyses. In order to better address students' socioemotional needs as well as their academic skills, Guilford chose to redesign an existing study skills course, shifting the course toward a greater focus on students' responsibility for their own learning. Modeled on Skip Downing's *On Course* philosophy,[5] this newly revised course focused on helping students overcome their personal challenges through intensive reflection on their past history and future goals. Additionally, the course provided some opportunities for academic skill-building through class presentations, journal writing, quizzes, and an end-of-semester course project. The course was offered as a two-credit class to students in need of one or more developmental education course in reading, English, or math and was taught by faculty or staff members trained in the *On Course* philosophy and pedagogy.

MDRC's evaluation of Guilford's success course began in spring 2008. It employs a random assignment evaluation design to examine the impact of the program on students' achievement. A total of 911 students were enrolled in the study over the course of three semesters (spring 2008, fall 2008, and spring 2009). Using a lottery-like process, students were assigned to either a program group (458 students), which received the success course intervention, or to a control group (453 students), which received the college's regular services (and were not enrolled in the success course). By comparing the outcomes of program and control group students over time, the study is able to gauge the impact of Guilford's student success course on academic measures such as students' persistence in college, grades, and course completion. Quantitative data on students' backgrounds and academic achievement were also collected through a baseline information form and student transcript data. Qualitative data were gathered on the program and students' experiences during two site visits to the college. During these visits, researchers interviewed administrators, faculty, staff, and participating students and conducted a student survey, which asked questions about the personal beliefs and habits the success course was expected to affect.

Key Findings

- **Guilford's implementation of the student success course stayed true to the *On Course* philosophy, with a strong emphasis on improving stu-**

[4]Stovall (2000); Derby and Smith (2004); Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007); Scrivener, Sommo, and Collado (2009); Scrivener et al. (2008).

[5]Downing (2008).

dents' psychosocial skills and habits. Instructors in the course were generally well trained; all faculty and staff received at least a three-day introduction to the *On Course* pedagogy and curriculum. Lessons tended to engage students in critical reflection about their own personal experiences and habits, with an effort to promote an awareness of their own role in their learning and future responsibilities. Students were encouraged to reflect upon their role in their learning through assignments such as weekly journal writing or by sharing their personal experiences with the class. Students also received some instruction and practice in study and academic skills through activities such as quizzes and a formal class paper and presentation.

- **Evidence suggests that the success course was more strongly implemented in the first semester of the study than in later semesters.** During the first semester of the course, instructors had a great deal of enthusiasm for teaching the course and met monthly to discuss their teaching and best practices. During the final two semesters, however, this enthusiasm was less apparent. Several new instructors noted that they felt less prepared to teach the curriculum and deal with students' socioemotional issues, while some seasoned instructors explained that they had seen few benefits from the course in their first semester of teaching it. Additionally, because monthly meetings were discontinued in the final two semesters, several new instructors felt that they received less support in implementing the course.

- **Students' participation in Guilford's success course declined over the course of the program semester, resulting in only 61 percent of the program group students taking and completing the course. However, it is difficult to conclude how this may have affected students' outcomes.** Weeks or months often ensued between the time of random assignment and registration and the first day of classes, giving students ample time to reorganize their schedules and drop the class. When conducting exploratory analyses, the effect of student participation on academic outcomes was inconsistent over time. As a result, it is unclear whether a higher participation rate would have made the program more successful in improving academic outcomes.

- **A follow-up survey of program and control group students found that Guilford's student success course had a positive impact on students' self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, interest in lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, and positive engagement in college among students with low levels of these attributes.** This suggests that Guilford's

success course was able to improve personal decision making, awareness of themselves and others, and commitment to their education among students who had lower levels of these abilities.

- **Guilford's success course had no meaningful effects on students' academic achievement during the semester that the program operated or in the following semesters.** There were no statistically significant differences between control and program group students in course registration or enrollment, credits attempted, course pass rates, course withdrawal rates, credits earned, successful completion of developmental education courses, or grade point averages, either during the semester of the success course or in the three following semesters. This lack of meaningful academic impacts suggests that the social and psychological impacts, though significant, may not have been strong enough to affect students' achievement and that other programs and services may be needed to improve their academic performance.

The results of this study reveal that Guilford's new success course, with its focus on social and emotional skills, was able to foster some changes in students' attitudes and perspectives. Unfortunately, however, these improvements did not translate into improved academic outcomes for the overall group of students to whom it was offered. While the mixed results from this study do not provide strong evidence that a success course alone improves student academic outcomes, these findings should be taken in concert with other studies that have shown more positive results for these courses, particularly when success courses are one component in more comprehensive programs.

For instance, the findings in this study are not unlike those from a student success program at Chaffey College, which targeted probationary students. At Chaffey, an enhanced version of the student success program, which framed the program as mandatory and included visits to the college's campus-based tutoring centers in reading, writing, and math, had positive impacts on students' engagement and achievement.[6] Similarly, a number of positive impacts on students' outcomes have been observed with learning communities that included a student success course. At Houston Community College, for example, a program that linked a success course and developmental math resulted in positive effects on students' developmental math pass rates.[7]

However, even when a program is well implemented, the impact of a one-semester intervention on students' achievement may be modest and less likely to achieve the lofty goals of

[6]Scrivener, Sommo, and Collado (2009).
[7]Weissman et al. (2011).

improved grades, credits earned, and graduation across the board. In each of the studies noted above, impacts on students' academic achievement tended to be modest and generally sustained only during the semester in which the program operated or one semester after. These short-term effects suggest that other issues may be creating more substantial barriers to students' academic progress than those a success course can address. For instance, while success courses may help improve students' soft skills and give them a better understanding of how to manage college life, students may still be overwhelmed by larger challenges in their lives, such as an inability to afford their school tuition or the struggle to balance work, school, and family responsibilities. Similarly, success courses do not address some of the structural and academic barriers students may face in college, such as the need to pass a long sequence of developmental education courses or continued failure in a particular academic course.

Success courses can play an important role in helping students to learn about the variety of programs and services that may benefit them during their academic career. However, these courses also present an opportunity cost for students, as they often enroll in a success course at the expense of taking an additional academic course. As this study found, students acquired fewer academic credits during the semester that they took the two-credit success course, in part because they were unable to fit in an additional academic course. An additional concern is that credits for most success courses are not transferrable to four-year institutions.

With these concerns in mind, colleges may wish to consider ways in which success courses can be incorporated into larger, more systemic approaches to improving developmental education students' academic experiences. Given the relatively short-term effects of these courses and the opportunity costs they present to students, colleges may need to look toward less ambitious interventions that support students' psychosocial well-being but do not require them to choose between academic courses and their introduction to college life. In order to effect greater changes in students' achievement, colleges might consider more comprehensive approaches to improving students' academic performance, such as reforms in developmental education instruction or the structuring of developmental education course sequences. A different combination of these efforts, which address students' social challenges while also focusing more concretely on their academic needs, may prove even more promising.

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