Student Success Courses for Sustained Impact

What Are Student Success Courses?

Student success courses serve as extended college orientations for entering students. These courses—also known as College 101 or Introduction to College courses—typically impart college know-how by providing information about campus policies and services, assistance with academic and career planning, and instruction in study habits and personal skills. They are based on the premise that nonacademic skills and behaviors are as germane to college success as academic preparation.

The structure and focus of student success courses vary widely. Some are one-credit courses, and some are worth three credits. Sometimes success courses are combined with an academic course. Some focus primarily on college readiness skills, such as note taking, and others take a more holistic approach and include topics such as personal wellness. The courses are generally taught by adjuncts and support services staff.

According to a 2009 survey of more than 1,000 two- and four-year institutions, 87 percent of participating colleges offered a first-year student success course.[1] A more recent survey of 288 community colleges found that 83 percent offered such a course.[2]

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This is part three of CCRC's nonacademic student supports practitioner packet. For an overview of nonacademic supports, see *What We Know About Nonacademic Student Supports* (part one). For ideas on how advising systems can be designed to provide sustained and integrated services for students throughout college, see *Designing a System for Strategic Advising* (part two).

Why and How Do Student Success Courses Influence Student Outcomes?

Most literature on student success courses posits that these courses increase students' attachment to college by helping them develop relationships and institutional knowledge, and that this process helps students to become integrated into the institution, and ultimately, to persist.

On the basis of CCRC's research on success courses and, more broadly, nonacademic supports,[3] we conceive of these courses as ideally providing a venue for relationship building and information provision *and* for giving students an extended opportunity to apply and practice skills and habits that are necessary for college success. Lasting improvements to student outcomes can only occur if students emerge from success courses with the ability to apply skills and knowledge to different contexts as they progress through college.

How Do Student Success Courses Fit Into a Broader Approach to Nonacademic Supports?

Well-implemented student success courses can serve as a central feature of a broad nonacademic support strategy that we have termed SSIP (sustained, strategic, intrusive and integrated, and personalized).[4] Because there are limits to any short-term intervention, efforts to improve student success courses should occur in tandem with a reexamination of how academic and nonacademic services are organized and deployed across the college and throughout students' college experience. While student success courses can provide a robust learning experience for entering students, colleges should provide continued opportunities for practice and application of the skills critical to college success.
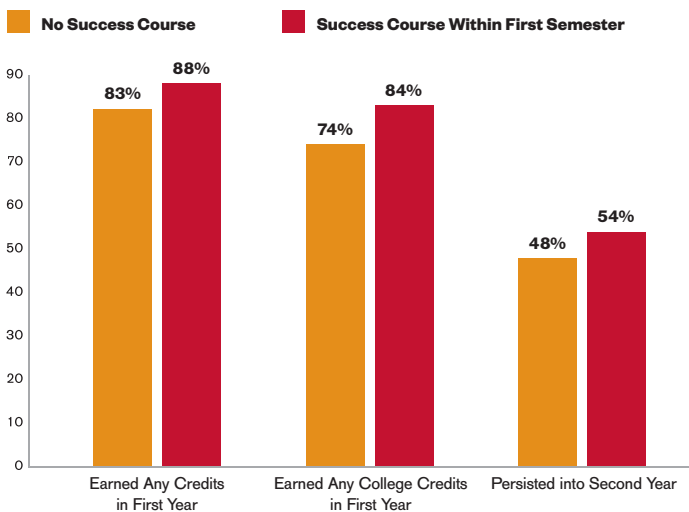
What the Research Tells Us

Studies Have Found Improved Short-Term Outcomes for Students Who Take Student Success Courses

A number of studies have found that enrolling in student success courses is positively associated with short-term outcomes, such as credit accumulation, grades, and persistence.[5] For instance, a CCRC study of students in the Virginia Community College System found improvements in credit accumulation and persistence to the second year for students who enrolled in student success courses in their first semester.[6]

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Short-Term Outcomes for Students Enrolled in Student Success Courses[7]

Legend: ■ No Success Course ■ Success Course Within First Semester

	Earned Any Credits in First Year	Earned Any College Credits in First Year	Persisted into Second Year
No Success Course	83%	74%	48%
Success Course Within First Semester	88%	84%	54%

The study also looked at the association between outcomes and the level of remedial math that students were assigned to. The analysis found that students in the lower two levels of remedial math appeared to receive larger benefits from enrolling in student success courses than students who enrolled in the highest level of remedial math.

Findings on Long-Term Benefits of Student Success Courses Are Mixed

Some studies have found that enrollment in student success courses is positively associated with long-term outcomes, such as transfer and credential completion. For instance, a 2007 CCRC study of students in the Florida College System found that students who enrolled in student success courses were more likely to persist, to complete credentials, and to transfer to the state university system.[8]

However, a number of other studies, including two studies using a rigorous experimental design, found that benefits from participating in success courses faded over time.[9]

Why Might Benefits of Student Success Courses Fade?

To understand why the benefits of student success courses might not be sustained over time, and how the courses might be reformed to contribute more significantly to improved long-term outcomes, CCRC examined success courses at three community colleges in one statewide community college system and conducted interviews with approximately 170 college personnel and students.

Findings from the study suggest that the student success courses were effective in providing students with new information and exposing them to potentially useful skills. However, because the courses sought to address a wide range of topics in a limited number of class hours, they did not offer students sufficient opportunities to apply and practice important skills. Additionally, the courses were isolated from the colleges' academic departments, so skills and lessons were not reinforced in academic courses.[10]

How Do Institutional Factors Inhibit Optimal Course Implementation?

CCRC's research suggests that student success courses are often subject to institutional and contextual constraints that contribute directly to less-than-ideal implementation. For instance, at the colleges CCRC observed, system-wide curricular requirements left little time for in-depth practice of critical skills. Additionally, a mandate that all students enroll in a success course within their first 15 credits meant that colleges had to scramble to find staffing for the courses, often relying on adjuncts who were less knowledgeable than full-time faculty about the college's policies and services.[11]

The chart on the next page demonstrates how institutional constraints result in implementation choices that may adversely affect both course pedagogy and the way that students and disciplinary faculty perceive success courses.

Student success courses are often subject to institutional and contextual constraints that contribute to less-than-ideal implementation.

INFLUENCE OF IMPLEMENTATION CHOICES ON PEDAGOGY AND PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS COURSES[12]			
INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT	IMPLEMENTATION CHOICE	PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS AND DISCIPLINARY FACULTY	PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES
The number of credits students must take for accreditation and licensing requirements limits the number of credits available for success courses.	Colleges offer a one-credit student success course.	The course is not viewed as an important and integral part of the college's academic enterprise. Students see it as an "easy A" and a "waste of time."	The small number of contact hours result in teacher-centered, lecture-based pedagogy in order to cover wide-ranging content as quickly as possible.
Academic and support services exist in separate silos; disciplinary faculty are not expected to take on active roles in developing students' nonacademic skills.	Student success courses are overseen by and affiliated with student services.	The course is not considered an integral part of college. Students and disciplinary faculty perceive it as unconnected to students' academic experience.	Success course instructors do not contextualize skills and knowledge in academic content, *and* disciplinary faculty do not reinforce the skills and knowledge taught in the success courses in their classes.
The state system requires a long set of topics to be covered in success courses.	Colleges include all topics required by the state in the success course curriculum *and* include additional topics they view as important.	The long list of topics covered in the course conveys the sense that there is no central set of objectives. Students experience an "information dump,"[13] and disciplinary faculty do not take the course seriously.	Success course instructors superficially touch on many topics but lack the time for in-depth activities or group discussions.
Colleges need to ensure that students across multiple course sections and formats have a standardized experience; they also need to ease planning for success course instructors.	Colleges develop and distribute standardized course materials that are simplistic, lack flexibility, and do not emphasize practice and application of skills.	Students do not feel the textbook readings and class exercises are challenging or meaningful. Disciplinary faculty do not see success course content as important or relevant.	Success course instructors are forced to review all topics, regardless of relevance, to ensure students are prepared for a standardized final exam. Textbooks and worksheets crowd out pedagogies that would emphasize contextualized practice.

Designing Success Courses for Maximum Impact

There is strong evidence that students find success courses valuable and that these courses improve short-term outcomes. With thoughtful reforms, they could be leveraged to have even an greater impact on student success. On the basis of current research knowledge, we make the following suggestions for how colleges might design success courses to have a more sustained effect. These reforms can be made within the context of common constraints, such as credit hour and enrollment requirements.

Narrow course content.

Although colleges may have legitimate reasons for including a broad array of content in student success courses, it appears that the courses could be made more effective by covering fewer topics in greater depth . This change would be best achieved through a deliberative process in which stakeholders from student services and academic departments, as well as students, work together to determine the

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knowledge, skills, and habits needed to get off to a strong start in college. The prioritized knowledge, skills, and habits can be translated into concrete learning objectives for use in student success courses. Other important topics related to college success can be addressed through other strategies and venues, such as meetings with academic advisors, companion courses, and contextualized learning.

Develop deliberate and outcomes-driven staffing structures.

Although staffing of success courses is constrained by enrollment and budgetary considerations, colleges could make more strategic choices in this area to ensure that teaching in success courses promotes learning-for-application. For example, colleges could use disciplinary faculty to staff student success courses. Disciplinary faculty are acutely aware of the demands placed on new college students and would be better able than support services staff to contextualize skills and provide opportunities for practice within the course curriculum. Using disciplinary faculty would also help to bridge the divide between academic courses and student success courses.

Another possibility, if resources permit, is to move toward a model in which success courses are taught by dedicated college success course instructors. Those hired to teach under such a model would have the time to develop and refine their pedagogical approaches in order to encourage learning-for-application. This model of staffing would provide instructors with long-term positions, allowing them to increase their knowledge of the college; it would also send the message that the course is important enough to deserve its own faculty, with specialized course knowledge and duties.

Teach the content of student success using strategies that emphasize application and sustained practice.

In the student success courses CCRC researchers observed, lecture was the dominant instructional strategy, in large part because of the wide range of content required to be covered. With a streamlined set of learning objectives, faculty would be able to employ pedagogies that emphasize application and in-depth learning, which in turn might result in more enduring impacts on student success.

Such teaching-for-application might include problem-solving activities that allow students to wrestle with certain concepts without much instructor intervention, punctuated with mini-lectures designed to scaffold students' learning. It might also involve mixing individual and group activities and embedded opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning and to help one another in class. What is critical is that pedagogical choices are directly tied to learning objectives and that expectations are made clear for how students will need to apply the knowledge and skills learned in student success courses throughout their college careers.

Develop common course assignments geared toward reflection, application, and practice.

Common course materials can ensure that success courses are consistent across a college. Moreover, instructors appreciate having a bank of classroom activities to use when planning lessons. Including activities that explicitly encourage learning-for-application could enhance the usefulness of common course materials and improve student outcomes. Instead of offering checklists, worksheets, and quick assignments, course materials should focus on helping instructors craft long-term, reflective, and interactive activities. Course materials might include guides for helping students link their career goals to majors and program planning, essay prompts for reflective writing, or discussion guides.

Disciplinary faculty should participate in developing learning objectives for success courses and reinforce student success–related learning in their own courses.

Reinforce student success learning objectives in academic courses.

Success courses tend to be disconnected from academic coursework, which limits opportunities for disciplinary faculty to reinforce the knowledge students gain in success courses. Explicitly relating success course content to academic offerings can increase the likelihood that students will find the course content useful and know when to apply it.

Disciplinary faculty should participate in developing learning objectives for success courses, and they should reinforce student success–related learning in their own courses. For example, academic faculty can contextualize time management and revision skills by requiring students to revise and hand in several drafts of an essay before the final version is due.

Moving the location of student success course offices into an academic department, or having the course overseen by an academic dean, may create more intentional linkages between academic departments and student support services. This model, which exists in many four-year colleges,[14] makes it easier for success course instructors and academic faculty to work together to achieve agreed-upon learning outcomes.

Integrate student services functions to build and sustain students' progress toward specific student success learning objectives.

At many colleges, there is a disconnect not only between student services and academic divisions but also within student services. To facilitate better integration, student services personnel should consider using student success learning objectives to create linkages across services.

For example, a particular college might determine that a primary learning goal of student success courses is *for students to develop academic plans linked to a coherent program of study and grounded in an understanding of career preparation.* In this case, advisors serving students during the college application, placement testing, and registration processes should communicate this objective directly to students and preliminarily assess the coherence of students' career aspirations and academic plans.

A mandatory, first-semester student success course would then provide students with opportunities to delve more deeply into academic planning through sustained learning activities. Staff from the career and transfer center could come to a series of classes and work directly with students instead of relying on students to approach their office. And finally, advisors could meet with students in subsequent semesters to revisit their initial career and academic goals and ensure that students are on track.

Conclusion

Research indicates that student success courses already make positive contributions to students' short-term success in college.[15] We contend that these courses have the potential to make an even larger and more lasting impact on student outcomes. To increase their impact, colleges must ensure that these courses have concrete but limited learning goals and provide ample opportunities for contextualized practice and application. The integration of the learning goals across support services and within academic courses could also strengthen the longer term impacts of these courses.

To achieve this level of integration, it is important that both support services staff and disciplinary faculty work together to determine success course learning goals and to familiarize themselves with success course curriculum and assignments. Implemented rigorously, and in conjunction with an institution-wide approach to sustained, integrated, and personalized supports, success courses can play a vital role in ensuring that community college students have the skills they need to succeed.

Colleges must ensure that student success courses have concrete but limited learning goals and provide ample opportunities for contextualized practice and application.

Endnotes

1.   Padgett & Keup (2011).
2.   Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012).
3.   Karp et al. (2012); Karp (2011).
4.   See What We Know About Nonacademic Student Supports, part one of this packet.
5.   Boudreau & Kromrey (1994); Schnell & Doetkott (2003); Scrivener, Sommo, & Collado (2009); Strumpf & Hunt (1993); Weiss, Brock, Sommo, Rudd, & Turner (2011); Yamasaki (2010).
6.   This analysis focused on early enrollment in College 101 courses in order to capture any association with short-term outcomes, on the assumption that they would have the greatest impact on short-term outcomes, and to avoid including students who enroll late in their college career because of a requirement for completion (which would skew the association between enrollment and completion) (Cho & Karp, 2012).
7.   Analysis is based on a sample of 23,267 students who enrolled for the first time in the Virginia Community College System in 2004. Of these, 14,807 students enrolled in at least one College 101 course. The analysis controlled for student demographics (gender, age, ethnicity/race, Pell Grant received, ESL enrollment) and institutional characteristics (urban/rural/suburban setting, expenditure per student), as well as whether a student was attending full-time or had ever enrolled in dual enrollment (Cho & Karp, 2012).
8.   The analysis is based on data from a cohort of all students who entered a Florida community college for the first time in fall 1999. The study tracked students for 17 terms and examined the percentage of students who completed a credential, controlling for demographic characteristics and prior academic achievement (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).
9.   Boudreau & Kromrey (1994); Rutschow, Cullinan, & Welbeck (2012); Weiss et al. (2011).
10. Karp et al. (2012).
11. Karp et al. (2012).
12. Karp et al. (2012).
13. Grubb (2006).
14. Keup & Petschauer (2011).
15. Boudreau & Kromrey (1994); Schnell & Doetkott (2003); Scrivener et al. (2009); Strumpf & Hunt (1993); Weiss et al. (2011); Yamasaki (2010).

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