

A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

# Change and Sustain/Ability

A PROGRAM DIRECTOR'S REFLECTIONS ON INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Rose Asera

A Report from  
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching  
**STRENGTHENING PRE-COLLEGIATE EDUCATION  
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES**  
2008

### **The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation**

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been making grants since 1966 to solve social and environmental problems at home and around the world. The Foundation concentrates its resources on activities in education, environment, global development, performing arts, and population. In addition, the Foundation has programs that make grants to advance the field of philanthropy, and to support disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. More information may be found at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).

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Founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1905 and chartered in 1906 by an act of Congress, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is an independent policy and research center with the primary mission “to do and perform all things necessary to encourage, uphold, and dignify the profession of the teacher.” The improvement of teaching and learning is central to all of the Foundation’s work. The Foundation is located in Stanford, California. More information may be found at [www.carnegiefoundation.org](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org).

### **Recommended Bibliographic Listing**

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## A Word About Language

Throughout SPECC’s work, all of us involved have grappled with finding the right language to capture our focus on underprepared students. As readers will see, we have used several terms: pre-collegiate, developmental, remedial, and basic skills, recognizing that these are not synonymous and that, for better or worse, each brings its own history and values. The term “basic skills” has recently gained ground in California because of the ambitious state-wide Basic Skills Initiative now moving into a third phase of activity, and it is thus a term that connects SPECC’s work to a larger set of activities from which we have learned and to which we hope to contribute.

Our intent throughout is to point to the importance of knowledge and capacities without which students cannot achieve higher levels of learning or thrive as workers and citizens in today’s world. These include foundational skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as attitudes and habits related to effective learning: study skills, confidence, and an ability to persevere and succeed.

### SPECC PROJECT RESOURCES

“Change and Sustain/Ability: A Program Director’s Reflections on Institutional Learning” is one of a number of SPECC products and publications developed by Carnegie staff members. For a full listing, see [www.carnegiefoundation.org/specc](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/specc).

## Introduction and Overview

How do educational institutions encounter, respond to, and incorporate ideas about teaching and learning? How do campuses transform ideas into local practice and policy? In other words, how do institutions learn? As director of a multi-site, action research project working with 11 California community colleges, I had the opportunity to ponder these questions.

Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC) was organized by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in partnership with The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate goal of SPECC was to increase student learning in developmental—or basic skills—classes. However, our concern was not just the success of students in classes at those participating colleges. We had a broader and more ambitious knowledge-building agenda about student learning, professional learning, and institutional learning. While SPECC findings about teaching and learning and the process of faculty inquiry are presented in greater detail in other project reports and essays, this paper focuses on my observations about institutional learning. Through campus visits or from reading reports, I would often learn about a new activity, perhaps a learning community or faculty inquiry group that had sprung up as a part of SPECC. Sometimes I was puzzled—something that seemed likely to succeed hadn't worked. Other times I was excited—where I had anticipated a cautious baby step, the campus seemed to make great leaps. I wanted to make sense of these observations and understand what increased the likelihood of positive change on campus. In other words, I wanted to understand more about institutional learning and share my thoughts with others who ask similar questions.

I came to define institutional learning as **progress toward becoming an institution where learning is the expected norm for all members of the community**. In such an institution, faculty, administrators, and staff all continue to learn and grow in ways that support increased student learning. This paper is also about the interaction between individual learning and institutional learning—how an individual can contribute to changing a campus culture, which in turn supports and encourages change by colleagues across campus.

The SPECC team's aim was to organize the project in ways that allowed campuses to build capacity for ongoing improvement. The themes of institutional change and sustainability were part of our conversations with the SPECC campuses throughout the duration of the project, starting with our initial request for proposals. This paper explores **a different way to think about institutional change and sustainability**. The terms *change/ability* and *sustain/ability* describe capacities for change that are not constant, but rather can grow and develop in purposeful ways.

The first section of this paper describes the SPECC action research design and the ways we worked with participating colleges. The second section focuses on four characteristics of **change/ability** that emerged over the course of the project—**faculty leadership, knowledge of students, availability of data, and redefined professional development**. These were qualities that made it possible for the campus initiatives to develop successfully. Next, I examine the concept of **sustain/ability**, including strategies such as **constructing the campus story** and **infrastructural flexibility and imagination** that campuses used to weave innovations into the campus culture and climate. The conclusion looks at **the power of community** to support and maintain institutional learning at all levels.

## The SPECC Project: Action Research in Action

The multi-site, action research design of SPECC meant that the 11 community colleges essentially became locally-shaped laboratories for experiments in teaching and learning. Rather than having the colleges all attempt the same intervention in the same way, we encouraged them to expand and enhance work already in progress. This design let every campus build on existing programs and capitalize on local strengths. SPECC was not a search for a single best way to conduct basic skills

**SPECC was not a search for a single best way to conduct basic skills education, but an experiment in real-time to find multiple ways to improve student learning.**

education, but an experiment in real-time to find multiple ways to improve student learning. We chose a range of campuses that had already begun changing some aspect of their basic skills programs and had promising data on their effectiveness. The campuses agreed to expand on their work, study the effects of their programs, work with us to learn from the experience, and share the knowledge gained.

### Building Community

The team at Carnegie served as “SPECC Central,” responsible for fostering community and building knowledge. Community was one of the central SPECC strategies. Teachers acknowledge the isolation of their work. In their individual classrooms or rushing between classes, faculty members do not know if their take on the curriculum or their standards of grading are like or unlike those of their colleagues. Rooted in the experience of other Carnegie projects, the SPECC team intentionally nurtured a sense of community among the campus leadership teams. As the community took shape, it provided a sense of connection and context to counteract the isolation of the campuses and of teaching.

Two Carnegie activities encouraged the emerging sense of community: convenings and campus visits. Convenings—annual project-wide meetings—were multi-day opportunities to formally share work. Held in a beautiful setting, with time for important conversations and personal connections, the convenings combined hard work with a feeling of celebration. These gatherings gave the Carnegie SPECC team a chance to express how much we appreciated and learned from the campus initiatives.

Bringing campuses together gave us an opportunity to make the campus work public and see how ideas moved across colleges. Although conventional wisdom warned that community colleges might hide behind a curtain of local concerns, we found the opposite to be true. Campuses quickly identified their similarities and learned from each others’ experiences. To use the language of business, this power of community could be described as an efficiency in the system; local learning was able to stimulate learning at other campuses.

The convenings provided a safe place for the faculty leaders to discuss problems and possible solutions with colleagues who understood the particular challenges of community college work. After listening to the range of work on other campuses at the first project-wide convening, one coordinator noted, “There are people in this room that can help me on my own campus.” The coordinators visited each other, invited others to come make presentations on their campuses, organized joint retreats, and

co-presented at conferences. They drew on each other as resources and generously shared their own experiences and time. The network stretched well beyond the meetings. Ultimately community was as much an outcome of SPECC as it was a strategy.

The Carnegie SPECC team visited the campuses once a year, which gave us an on-the-ground sense of the work in progress at the different colleges. These annual visits gave us the chance to speak with SPECC participants who did not attend the convenings, and gave our team researcher the opportunity to meet with the campus institutional researcher. Preparing for our visit also gave the SPECC campus coordinator a chance to update the president and vice president on work carried out under the grant; and at every visit we made sure to meet with top administrators to express our appreciation for the campus work. By visiting colleges we were also able to cross-pollinate, connecting individuals on different campuses who were grappling with similar problems or implementing similar approaches.

Aside from the formal contact and the campuses' reports, we encouraged the campus coordinators to contact us at any time with questions, problems, or interesting news. As the project director I was the point of contact for most of this communication. Frequently when one campus had good news—a campus grant to support faculty inquiry, or a formal award from the District Office—I had the pleasant task of sharing it with other campuses.

One final quality that proved essential to the success of the SPECC project was flexibility. In other Carnegie Foundation projects—such as the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate—we noted that some of the most powerful and useful ideas emerge from the interaction among participants at convenings, conferences, and other gatherings where people collect new ideas and translate them to their own settings. We intentionally made the SPECC program design flexible because we wanted campuses to be able to incorporate new ideas into their original plan: in other words, we wanted them to be able to learn and grow. And the campuses understood this. As Bruce Smith, Dean of Liberal Arts and SPECC coordinator for City College of San Francisco, noted in the campus's final report:

...the grants provided to colleges for the SPECC project had a unique quality: flexibility... At the time of application, most granting agencies require that the applicant know not only exactly what will be done with the funding, but also exactly what outcomes will be achieved within the defined period of the grant. This is not an unreasonable expectation from a foundation or agency that is being asked to give a large sum of money to a college. However, as the experience of the SPECC colleges may demonstrate, this is not necessarily the most effective way to promote change in community colleges. Projects like CCSF's English and Math initiatives need flexibility—the ability to use formative assessments to revise strategies and develop the capacity for change that will lead to ongoing improvements and the sustainability of professional and institutional learning. (City College of San Francisco, SPECC Report, 2008, p. 6)

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### Diverse Campuses and Activities

SPECC colleges were chosen to reflect a diversity of size, location (urban, rural, suburban), and student population. The smallest college was West Hills College, Coalinga, with 2,600 full-time equivalent students, while City College of San Francisco and Pasadena City College had over 30,000 full-time equivalent students. And, as noted above, these were campuses that had already begun to experiment with their developmental education courses and programs.

PARTICIPATING SPECC COLLEGES	LOCATION	FTEs 2007
<b>Cerritos College</b>	Norwalk	24,000
<b>Chabot College</b>	Hayward	14,000
<b>City College of San Francisco</b>	San Francisco	31,300
<b>College of the Desert</b>	Palm Desert	10,300
<b>College of the Sequoias</b>	Visalia	11,000
<b>Glendale Community College</b>	Glendale	19,000
<b>Laney College</b>	Oakland	10,500
<b>Los Medanos College</b>	Pittsburg	8,000
<b>Merced College</b>	Merced	9,500
<b>Pasadena City College</b>	Pasadena	30,000
<b>West Hills College District</b>	Coalinga	2,600

There were a number of compelling reasons for SPECC's decision to target teaching and learning at the basic skills level, the strongest being the sheer magnitude of the problem. While numbers vary somewhat by campus, on average 70 percent of students who go through the campus assessment process place into classes below transfer-level in English language arts, and over 90 percent place into classes below transfer-level in mathematics (Moore and Shulock, 2007, p. 12). And by all measures, few of the students who start, particularly in the lower levels of basic skills, ever complete the sequence and go on to a degree, certificate, or transfer.

Moreover, basic skills instruction proved to be a strategic site for institutional learning and change. At the developmental level, the issues of teaching and learning are acute—the name

'basic skills' underestimates the intellectual challenge of teaching academic material to young adults who have seen the topics before but not mastered them. In addition, these same students who are enrolled in classes that are designated basic skills may be enrolled—simultaneously or subsequently—in general education or career and technical education classes across campus. Thus basic skills instruction, though sometimes marginalized or overlooked, really needs to be a campus-wide issue.

Participating in SPECC gave colleges a chance to implement or expand a number of program models and experiment with new forms of pedagogy in basic skills classes. One classroom model that several of the SPECC colleges adapted was the learning community, a design that links a basic skills class with a transfer-level class, counseling class, career technical education class, or other basic skills class (Tinto, 1998). In addition to helping students make connections between the content of two classes or disciplines, learning communities aim to help students connect with faculty and peers, fostering a greater sense of belonging on campus. Many of these campus learning community programs started with support from Title III or Title V grants.



Other innovative pedagogical approaches included new uses of instructional technology and supplemental academic support. In the use of technology, one English department expanded a model of teaching composition in a computer lab with an online “living textbook” that included examples of student work. Another campus experimented with personal response devices, “clickers,” to get immediate feedback from students in a mathematics class. Campuses that used supplemental academic support had students trained as tutors or instructional aides work in reading and writing labs, Supplemental Instruction (SI) sessions, and in the classroom. A final important dimension of the campus initiatives was the creation of faculty inquiry groups, or FIGS. Conceived as a different approach to faculty development, FIGs became a setting for faculty to collaboratively investigate their teaching and their students’ learning (for a thorough discussion of faculty inquiry in SPECC, see Huber, 2008).

We also recognized that SPECC was only one of many projects that might be underway on these campuses at a given time. Along with the regular work of the institution, campuses participated in other grant-funded projects, networks, and state initiatives. In fact, as described later in the section on sustainability, the most enterprising campuses did not keep the work of SPECC separate; they integrated their SPECC efforts with other internally and externally-funded campus work.

Although this paper uses the language of “institutional” learning, we in fact worked with selected segments of each participating college. We worked directly with the project coordinator and leadership team on each campus, and they in turn engaged a group of faculty, typically comprised of 10 to 50 members. In addition, we met regularly with the institutional researchers and campus administrators directly responsible for instruction, including department chairs, deans and vice presidents of instruction. While we recognize that we were not working at a scale as comprehensive as complete institutional transformation (McClenney, 1999), we believed these practices could lead to cultural changes, and have the potential to be larger than self-contained innovations or programs.

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## Change/Ability

As early as the campus proposals and the first meeting of campus teams, we could see a range of sophistication in the ways that the campus coordinators organized, understood, and presented their campus work. Over the next two years, we noted that some individuals and campuses were better able to turn ideas into action. These campuses could recognize and respond to opportunities as they arose or even create opportunities to expand or diversify their projects. Of course, some of what made the difference was evident: campuses with more grant experience or more capacity in the institutional research office were better able to use resources. It seems worthwhile to explore these dimensions of change in greater depth.

### Characteristics of Institutional Change

From campus visits, reports, and conversations, we identified the characteristics that seemed to contribute to a college's ability to change. These characteristics appeared to develop over time: some campuses came in strong and grew stronger. Other campuses made early steps toward change and capacity. **By following the progress of different campuses, we were able to describe a developmental trajectory of institutional learning.** It is important to note that these observations on institutional learning are rooted in and reflective of the experiences of the SPECC colleges. These observations share the limitations of all observations: they are particular and subjective. They do not add up to a structural or procedural model for others to follow. Nor can this description be contracted to a quick checklist. Rather, it might be considered a navigational chart or perhaps a recommended investment list. These characteristics are malleable in the best sense: they can be fostered, encouraged, and supported. By naming them, we hope that other campuses will recognize these characteristics and encourage their growth.

#### Change/Ability

**Faculty leadership:** faculty take on leadership roles in campus-wide initiatives and innovations

**Knowledge of students:** the campus understands who their students are and designs programs with an understanding of the complexity of students' lives and learning

**Visibility of data and evidence:** a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data are available and used to understand and address local questions

**Redefined faculty development:** professional development is ongoing, collegial, and directly connected to the educational work of the institution

#### Sustain/Ability

**Campus progress told as a story:** prior experiences have been examined and harvested; learning is summarized as a narrative that gives people a sense of history, purpose, and direction

**Infrastructural flexibility and imagination:** programs are designed that cross campus silos, and existing structures are reshaped to serve different purposes

The trajectories of change in all four of these change/ability areas—faculty leadership, knowledge of students, visibility of data, and redefined professional development—roughly follow a pattern: from business as usual (traditional, or default practice), through emergent cases of innovation and experiments, to established practice with institutional support. The boundaries between the stages are not clearly marked. Most of the participating SPECC campuses brought to the project experiences that had already taken them beyond the default level; for these campuses, participation seemed to provide an opportunity to move from small scale innovation to broader and deeper development.

### **Faculty leadership: faculty take on leadership roles in campus-wide initiatives and innovations**

Theories of change, in education as well as business, stress the central importance of leadership.<sup>2</sup> In SPECC we focused on teaching and learning, so it's not surprising that we found dedicated leaders among faculty. In fact, the presence of these faculty leaders was an example of distributed leadership, which Elmore (2000) and others have more extensively described in K-12 settings. Distributed leadership means that individuals at all levels across the institution are responsible for ideas, decisions, and designs in their professional domains. Had we been working on issues of student services, career and technical education, or financial aid, we undoubtedly would have found examples of such leadership in those offices as well.

Faculty leadership was the single most important factor in any campus effort coming to life. These leaders, or “idea champions,” as some SPECC participants called them, played a special role in the local ecosystem. Enterprising faculty members drew on local knowledge and campus networks to make things happen: they wrote grants, initiated new programs, and invited wide participation in their initiatives.

Each SPECC campus had an individual, or as frequently a team of two faculty members, who served as the project coordinator. Those faculty members who were likely candidates to be named as grant coordinators had a history of participation in campus-wide initiatives. They had directed a prior grant, organized the campus accreditation self-study or led a campus-wide task force. Most of these faculty had been on the campus for an extended period of time and were known to be committed teachers. They had reshaped their teaching roles and taken on responsibilities for campus-wide initiatives while still maintaining a teacher's identity and practitioner's sensibility. A sampling of job titles reflects the wide ranging responsibilities that campus coordinators took on: Developmental Education Coordinator, Assessment or Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Coordinator, Teaching and Learning Center Director.

#### **THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF FACULTY LEADERSHIP**

- ▷ Faculty autonomous in the classroom
- ▷ Emerging faculty leadership in innovative programs
- ▷ Faculty leadership in campus-wide initiatives that cross boundaries
- ▷ Campus-wide positions are supported by campus funds to work with colleagues on program and faculty development

In the few cases where the coordinator hadn't previously been in a leadership role, didn't have the local network and connections, or the coordinator unexpectedly changed mid-project, the campus project ran less smoothly. In such cases, projects took longer to get started and fewer people on campus were involved or knew about the work.

An inseparable mix of personal warmth and campus-wide experiences meant that the coordinators were enmeshed in a network of relationships across campus and beyond. Walking across campus with any of these coordinators took time—they knew and greeted everyone. These relationships made it possible to draw on resources across campus and engage a wider range of participation. Their local knowledge led to an understanding of how to make things happen on their campus. These faculty leaders knew how to bring people together, how to get people to collaborate, and when and how to get someone to take on a challenge outside of their comfort zone. In addition, the savviest leaders were always looking for possible candidates to participate in programs and to grow into leadership roles.

Interestingly, coordinators on two campuses chose very different strategies for effecting change, reflecting both their own strengths and their knowledge of the campus culture. On one campus, with strong administrative support, the coordinators “infiltrated” a range of campus committees that were directly responsible for teaching and learning, including the curriculum, assessment, and professional

development committees. They identified and used existing structures to make issues visible and engage other faculty. On another campus, the coordinator chose to “fly under the radar” and used external grant funds to create a center that was outside of the administrative hierarchy. As the center became known on campus and beyond, its work was brought into the campus's structures.

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On about half the SPECC campuses two individuals—frequently described by colleagues as a “dynamic duo”—worked as a team to coordinate the project. In conversations with others on campus, the two individuals' names were sometimes run together as one. These co-coordinators often brought the perspectives of different academic disciplines and experiences to their work. When the pair talked about how they perceived their coordinator responsibilities, they could describe the different talents and skills each individual brought and how they divided the responsibilities and took turns on predictably difficult tasks. In addition, such a partnership was an effective way to mentor a faculty member new to leadership responsibilities.

The SPECC campus coordinator role, like any project manager role, was multifaceted. Coordinators were responsible for shaping the program design and engaging others in the process. They were also responsible for conveying the big picture vision of the project as well as making sure that the small

details received attention. This required a particular capacity for bifocal vision: one lens to see things at a distance, another for viewing things close-up. Effective coordinators need the ability to shift quickly between both views.

What encouraged and supported developmental growth along the faculty leadership trajectory? The SPECC campuses all designated project leaders; several were already in positions with campus-wide responsibilities when they began their SPECC projects. Looking at the developmental trajectory, several of these faculty coordinators had moved from an initial foray with a small innovative program to the mid-level stage of working with campus-wide projects. In fact, a few of the SPECC coordinators had created—or had created for them—positions that were supported by campus funds. For example, at Los Medanos College, following a Title III grant, a team of two faculty members from English and mathematics shared the title and reassigned time as developmental education coordinator. At City College of San Francisco (CCSF), following a grant from a foundation, the English Department created a basic skills coordinator to work with faculty on integrated reading and composition curriculum. A key characteristic of these positions was that they incorporated faculty development with day-to-day educational responsibilities such as curriculum development or creation and assessment of Student Learning Outcomes.

In fact, on many of the SPECC campuses, prior grants—federal, private foundation, and the state Chancellor’s Office—had provided opportunities to foster faculty leadership. There are undoubtedly many other ways to support the growth of faculty leaders, but external grants had provided the stimuli and resources for innovation and leadership. Along with the funds, the grants had required campuses to gather and analyze data, and often provided a structure for reflection as well as an interested audience.

A challenge to campuses, and to the system as a whole, is how to identify individuals—faculty, counselors, staff—who can play such leadership roles on their campuses. The system needs to create an infrastructure that will identify and support potential leaders on their campuses. And, based on the experience in SPECC, opportunities for cross-campus interactions among faculty, staff, and administrative leaders are invaluable.

A closely related challenge is to ensure that institutional learning does not depend solely on such individuals. Because of the current turnover in campus leadership, it is important that leaders at all levels think about changing cultures and structures in ways that make it possible for ideas to continue beyond the presence of any particular individual.

#### **SKILLS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CAMPUS COORDINATORS INCLUDE:**

- Envisioning the big picture and generating a sense of direction
- Paying attention to essential details such as budget and reporting
- Identifying and inviting faculty participation
- Creating and nurturing a network of relationships across campus
- Keeping essential teachers, counselors, and administrators informed about progress
- Identifying and mentoring potential leaders

### **Knowledge of students: the campus understands who their students are and designs programs with an understanding of the complexity of students' lives and learning**

The profile of California community college faculty and administrators is predominantly Caucasian and approaching retirement age. For the most part, these faculty have been academically successful all the way through graduate school. In contrast, current community college students come from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds and are frequently the first in their families to attend college. In addition to school schedules, community college students are balancing part-time or full-time work as well as family responsibilities as children, siblings, or parents. Moreover, this generation of students has grown up surrounded by media and technology and they frequently have different perceptions, skills, and experiences accessing and using information than their instructors do.

#### **THE DEVELOPMENTAL ARC OF A CAMPUS KNOWING ITS STUDENTS**

- ▷ Students come and leave with little sense of connection to campus; faculty may get to know students in their classes
- ▷ Faculty begin to inquire into students' learning and lives with a range of formal and informal interviews, surveys, think alouds, etc.
- ▷ Increased presence of student voices and student perspectives on the campus (e.g. student panels at campus-wide events)
- ▷ Programs are designed and responsive to students' needs; students are active participants in their own learning and in campus learning

While some faculty may still be looking in the rearview mirror for the population of students who historically attended community colleges ready to take the first two years of general education requirements, the majority of today's entering students place into basic skills classes. Thus colleges need to know more about who their current students are and what their lives are like; this means learning about students' backgrounds and cultures, their prior experiences in school, and the ways they learn most effectively. In addition, colleges need to understand more about students' lives

off campus and their career aspirations. Many students come to community college because they have been told that education is the way to a better job, but have little sense of the pathways to work or how particular classes advance their career goals.

The challenge for campuses is multifaceted: they must work to understand the complex lives of their students, to make them feel welcome on campus, and to design educational experiences that open their academic horizons. Although campuses have always assessed students to understand their academic gaps and deficits, it is equally important that campuses assess the strengths that students bring. The better that faculty and staff understand who their students are and what their lives entail, the better they can draw on those strengths, anticipate obstacles, and create effective classes and programs.

Almost all community colleges already have “boutique” programs that serve a specific population of students, focus on a career path, or prepare students for a particular major. These small programs are usually designed with the characteristics that the research literature recognizes as important for the success of basic skills students (Center for Student Success, 2007). These programs intensify instruction, provide a sense of home on campus, and integrate counseling, advising, and academic support. The likelihood of successfully completing their classes is higher for students in such programs than students who are not (Tinto, 1998, n.p.).

SPECC campuses had a number of such established intensive programs. Two examples include Laney College’s Project Bridge, a multi-course, interdisciplinary basic skills program for returning students started in 1979 (a learning community created before the term was popular), and College of the Sequoias’ LISTO, a learning community for underprepared low-income students that was built around an ethnic studies curriculum. Programs like these provide settings in which faculty and counselors get to know their students individually; and students describe them as personal and supportive (Bueschel, 2008, p. 11). Interestingly, despite their effectiveness, the most frequent criticism of these programs is they are too expensive, too personnel-intensive, and do not reach enough students.

Across SPECC campuses, faculty and institutional researchers used a range of formal methods, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys of student engagement, to learn more about their students and their educational experiences—past and present. In faculty development settings where faculty studied their own classrooms and their students’ learning (described below in the section on redefined professional development), mathematics and English faculty gained insight into students’ otherwise silent and invisible thought processes through research techniques such as “think alouds,” in which students articulate their thoughts and explanations while reading a passage or solving a mathematics problem. Understanding more about student learning became an intellectual imperative. As faculty examined student work for evidence of student learning, the drive to understand more about the trajectory of learning, the obstacles that deterred it, and the nature of student misunderstandings were powerful motivators to investigate more.

One of the strongest examples of making the student perspective visible was Chabot College’s video *Reading Between the Lives*.<sup>3</sup> A team of faculty members, with four students as co-investigators, interviewed Chabot students about their experiences with reading in class and beyond. Students talked frankly about their frustration with teachers who told them to “read Chapter 2” without any further guidance, or their aggravation when they purchased expensive textbooks that were never used in class. When shown on campus, the video opened up faculty conversations about reading, assignments, and textbooks. Shown in classrooms, students felt more comfortable discussing their fear and discomfort around reading after watching their peers on screen admit those same feelings. Faculty on campuses across the state have recognized the students and the dilemmas at Chabot as similar to their own, and have requested hundreds of copies of this video to share with others on their campuses.

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Another campus to powerfully incorporate student strengths into its SPECC work was Pasadena City College. Their Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) organizes intensive learning communities around developmental mathematics.<sup>4</sup> Students who have successfully gone through one of the learning communities can stay connected to the TLC and become tutors for subsequent participants. These tutors, who have similar backgrounds as the entering students, offer more than just academic support. By their presence and position they make it clear that this is a place where students are welcome and

**Tutors who come from the same backgrounds as the entering students offer more than just academic support. By their presence and position they make it clear that this is a place where students are welcome and will succeed.**

will succeed. Tutors can answer the kinds of questions new students are afraid to ask a faculty member.

And they stay connected to the students who were their tutors and to those students whom they tutor, providing generational continuity. The tutors also take on other program responsibilities, working with faculty in the classroom and giving feedback to the program.

There were also cautionary examples of what could happen when a campus did not know its students well enough. One campus attempted to create learning communities for Generation 1.5 students, students who were raised in the United States and attended local public schools, but for whom English is not the language spoken at home.<sup>5</sup> While Generation 1.5 students are generally fluent in spoken English, their reading and writing skills may not be as strong. However, such students do not define themselves by the “Gen 1.5” label, nor do they believe they need special programs. The campus knew that many of their students fit this profile, but the program organizers did not know how to recruit students who did not self-identify as Generation 1.5. When their first learning communities did not fill, the project coordinators reached the conclusion that they needed to do more research to better serve their students.

How did the value of understanding students grow on a campus and across campuses? In their initial proposal to SPECC, campuses prepared a demographic profile of their students. Some of the campuses had programs where they knew the participating students well, but once the idea of student voice was named, it took on a life of its own. When SPECC campuses shared examples of student voice—the video on student reading, or filmed student think alouds—other campuses were inspired to look more deeply into their own students’ lives and learning. At the same time, more state-wide and regional conferences invited student panels to make their voices heard.

The broader challenge campuses face is to understand students in both micro and macro terms, connecting fine-grained classroom observations of learning with the broad patterns of campus data, animating the campus-wide profiles with stories, faces, and examples. When professionals all across campus understand more about their students, the long-term benefits will be better designed campus programs and a greater sense of student engagement and agency in their own education.



## Visibility of data and evidence: a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data is available and used to address local questions

Data are the currency of educational reform. Current accreditation standards require a culture of evidence, so colleges are acutely aware of the need for data and evidence of learning at the class, program, and campus levels.

In their SPECC proposals, colleges included campus demographics and initial promising results from their basic skills programs. One of the things we looked for in reviewing their applications was institutional research capacity. However, as SPECC developed, inquiry was broadly defined and, as a result, the definition of useful evidence became broader than the usual campus data. The common metrics of course completion (retention), course grades (success), and continuation at the college (persistence) were necessary but not sufficient to answer the questions that faculty raised. In fact, analysis of quantitative data more frequently stimulated inquiry or generated hypotheses than definitively answered a question.

### THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF THE USE OF DATA AND EVIDENCE

- ▷ Data are gathered for reports that sit on shelves, unread
- ▷ Faculty are aware of campus data and request or gather other data as needed
- ▷ A range of quantitative and qualitative data is regularly gathered, distributed, and discussed across campus
- ▷ A culture of inquiry and evidence develops: data are available and evidence is used regularly by administrators and faculty in making programmatic decisions

Examples from several campuses illustrate how problematic grades can be. Faculty at three colleges faced the frustrating dilemma that they could document student learning in the classroom, but for many reasons—from competing demands in students' lives to variation in teachers' attendance requirements—this did not translate into success in class.<sup>6</sup> Such findings led to more inquiry: What were the barriers? How could they be addressed? What grading standards were teachers using in different sections of the same course?

Another case from City College of San Francisco illustrates the ways that an institutional research office can help unpack the nature of a problem. A group of six to eight English faculty worked together to integrate reading and writing in their entry-level developmental English class. Over four years they redesigned every dimension of the course—curriculum, instruction, assessment, scheduling, and coordination with a lab. Finally, the faculty felt that what they were doing was working, and student feedback from interviews and focus groups confirmed their impressions. However, they were discouraged when campus data revealed that only 55 percent of their students were passing, the same as the average success rate for all sections of the class. The institutional research office then conducted a grade variability study in which they compared pass rates for the more than 30 sections of that English class. The percentage of students who passed with a grade of A, B, or C ranged from 27 in one section to 92 in another. Clearly, a passing grade had little meaning across sections in terms of knowledge and skills or preparation for the next class in the sequence. The grades given by the teachers who had worked together tended to cluster around the middle; along with instructional changes, they had begun to negotiate common learning outcomes and what constituted evidence of student learning. However, when they looked at differences within their pass rates, they realized there were

differences in how they weighted classroom mechanics (e.g. absences, late assignments, etc.) and in their evaluation of assignments (e.g. specific criteria for evaluating each essay). Their next step was to collaboratively standardize their grading policies for all areas of the course.

The Glendale College Mathematics Department helps avert the threat of grade variability by giving common final exams for all of their developmental mathematics courses. The exam consists of 25 questions on identified course topics. All faculty teaching the class contribute possible questions and gather together to grade the exam. Then, using item analysis, the department can identify the topics students seem to have mastered and those that continue to be a challenge. Although the composite results are made public, individual faculty members are informed privately of their students' performance. In addition, the exam results let the department identify teachers whose students regularly perform well on particular topics and engage them as a resource for faculty development.

The use of data gathering and analysis went beyond quantitative institutional data; campuses used a range of qualitative methods as well. City College of San Francisco engaged a researcher to conduct focus groups of students in the integrated reading-writing class. When faculty from the interdisciplinary inquiry groups paired up to visit each other's classrooms and interview their colleague's class, they adapted the interview protocols that the evaluator had created for the English program. Chabot College regularly conducted a campus-wide survey of student engagement and several colleges, including West Hills and Pasadena City College, began to use the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to look at their students' experiences.

During the SPECC project, colleges were responsible for reporting data on their campus initiatives. In fact, during the first two years on some campuses it was difficult for the faculty leaders to get data from the institutional research (IR) office in the format requested. Over time—and after meetings with the institutional researchers—the reporting improved. Yet there was sometimes a disjuncture between the conscientious reporting of data and its actual use and application. Certainly participants became more familiar with the use of data. At Merced College, for example, one faculty member noted, “Before this we didn't know we had a researcher. Now we are in his office all the time.” While some campuses are still in the early stages of figuring out ways to use data, they all took important steps toward creating a culture of inquiry and evidence, where questions, investigations, and the use of a wide range of data are expected.

What increased the availability and use of data and evidence? On SPECC colleges, as the faculty became more involved in inquiry, the demand for local data grew. To a great extent, a campus' ability to respond to that demand rests on its institutional research capacity, which is limited at many colleges. City College of San Francisco, by contrast, has a well developed IR office that is able to gather qualitative data (surveys, interviews, focus groups) and has made a campus-wide effort to engage faculty in understanding quantitative data (using pivot tables, which give a choice of variables and interactions). However, few institutional research offices at other colleges have the same resources or capacity. A continuing challenge is for researchers and faculty to collaborate and connect the patterns of institutional-level quantitative data and the fine-grained classroom evidence of learning. The system as a whole faces the challenge of increasing research capacity across all colleges and making inquiry and analysis common tools in decision making.

## Redefined faculty development: professional development is ongoing, collegial, and directly connected to the educational work of the institution

Professional development has an uneven history at community colleges. Too often, professional development has been little more than a series of workshops or speakers, or a chance to attend a disciplinary conference. Although sometimes evaluated for participant satisfaction, these activities have rarely been assessed in terms of effect on professional or student learning. It is not surprising that the state system and colleges have viewed professional development as an add-on and an easy target for budget cuts during difficult fiscal times.

The full-time work load for community college teachers is 15 contact hours per week, which for a large number of faculty means teaching five three-hour classes per semester. This much teaching time—including time for prep and grading—along with campus and committee responsibilities, leaves faculty little time for professional conversation or collaboration. Little wonder then that the campuses' original SPECC budget proposals allocated the largest amount of money for faculty time. For the SPECC colleges an external grant meant an opportunity to buy and protect faculty time to engage in the intellectually and professionally revitalizing work of teaching.

### THE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY OF REDEFINED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- ▷ Sporadic workshops and conferences not necessarily related to educational work
- ▷ Emerging models of professional inquiry and collaboration, with increasing engagement of faculty members, including part-time faculty
- ▷ Professional learning is part of educational work such as curriculum development, design of common assessments, program review, and department meetings
- ▷ Professional learning and development is institutionalized: a faculty position is created to coordinate faculty learning; there are professional development plans at individual, department, and campus levels

Even before SPECC, a number of the participating colleges had begun to reshape their faculty development programs. Cerritos College, for example, was one of 21 colleges that participated in the Visible Knowledge Project (VKP), a national scholarship of teaching and learning project in which faculty created websites about their classroom studies.<sup>7</sup> Cerritos drew on the VKP experiences to design its SPECC project. Each group of faculty scholars started by constructing baseline portfolios (Bernstein et al., 2006). Faculty began this exercise by collaboratively examining examples of student work and articulating and negotiating standards of quality.

In another example, faculty at Los Medanos College were influenced by research from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (Schmidt, et al, 2002). This study found that ongoing faculty development, focused on the curriculum that faculty teach, has positive effects on student learning. As part of a Title III grant, Los Medanos faculty created teaching communities—semester-long settings in which groups of faculty teaching the same developmental English or mathematics class collaboratively investigated their students' learning in the designated courses. Led by one of the participating faculty members, the process included reading research literature, analyzing class assignments, and creating course portfolios. This teaching community model became a resource for other SPECC initiatives.

### FACULTY INQUIRY: THE NEXT GENERATION

Inspired by their experience with SPECC, the faculty leadership team at Chabot College applied for and received a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to continue work in faculty inquiry. Their new project, which will involve coordinators from other SPECC campuses, is called the Faculty Inquiry Network: Basic Skills in Complex Contexts (FIN). More information can be found at [www.chabotcollege.edu/fin](http://www.chabotcollege.edu/fin).

Inspired by Carnegie's presentations and resources on the scholarship of teaching and learning at the project-wide convenings, as well as by campus examples, the SPECC campuses found this approach to faculty inquiry compelling. Inquiry draws on and nurtures intellectual curiosity. In the process, faculty shape questions about daily aspects of teaching and learning and systematically gather and analyze data to answer those questions. Engaging in inquiry means looking both inward to the classroom and outward to the research literature and examples from practice. Faculty inquiry becomes a way to turn long-standing, thorny teaching problems—which are not desirable—into

research problems, which are worthy of intellectual investigation (Bass, 1999). In fact, many of the teachers who participated in SPECC had puzzles from the classroom or questions about learning that they had thought about, but never before taken the time to formally investigate. Faculty were ready for and responsive to the idea of studying their students' learning and their own teaching.

Understanding and advancing student learning is always the focus of inquiry, yet the SPECC campuses found different entry points into the inquiry cycle. No matter the starting point, one question led to other questions and to further investigation. A few examples:

- Laney College organized a Reflective Inquiry Group of faculty drawn from four—and in the second year (adding career and technical education) five—departments. Participating faculty designed and conducted classroom studies. They worked closely with a colleague in their department, and regularly shared findings with the larger group. The interdisciplinary character of the group opened conversations that would not have happened otherwise. English teachers learned where the machine shop was, and vocational teachers realized how much their students struggled with reading.
- At Pasadena City College the group of mathematics faculty who taught the summer pre-algebra intensive learning community worked with other pre-algebra teachers to redesign their upcoming summer curriculum. The group began by identifying core mathematical learning outcomes and developing related class activities. The experience of teaching the new curriculum led the faculty to conduct think alouds with students on pre-algebra problems.

- The College of the Desert mathematics department created faculty inquiry groups, which included full-time and part-time faculty, to construct common finals for developmental mathematics classes. This focus on assessment led to productive discussions about student learning outcomes. In addition, one mathematics faculty member, after participating in a literacy training, started having her students outline chapters in their mathematics textbooks. Two colleagues joined her in this activity and began to examine more deeply how this process affected student learning and identity.

Participants spoke articulately about how being part of a faculty inquiry group changed their perceptions, actions, and professional identity. Both conversationally and in a survey, faculty reported that their work in the inquiry groups brought them a deeper understanding of their students and the learning process (Richardson, in Huber, 2008). In fact, many faculty started to rethink the nature of class content through the eyes of a novice learner. Faculty became more willing to try new instructional approaches in the classroom, grounding those experiments in research literature and a commitment to systematically studying the effects of various approaches. Faculty inquiry provided a setting where creativity and critical thinking were complementary.

In addition, at all the colleges, participation in inquiry groups fostered collegial relationships. Some faculty inquiry groups conducted collaborative inquiries; in others, faculty conducted individual studies then brought their process and findings to a group of colleagues. These relationships contributed to a shared sense of responsibility for student learning. Faculty development shifted from being viewed as an external add-on to becoming an intellectually engaging and compelling part of the professional work of an individual and of the institution. Conversations about teaching and learning became a more frequent part of formal occasions such as departmental meetings.

How did these ideas and models of professional development move both within a campus and across campuses? In SPECC, the idea of faculty inquiry moved by contagion. Once the campus coordinators and team heard about the scholarship of teaching and learning and the possibilities of faculty inquiry, they responded with creativity and excitement. When the campus coordinators from Pasadena City College heard the description of the Los Medanos teaching communities, they looked at each other and said, “That’s what we need.” They returned to their campus and organized a group for the faculty teaching their mathematics learning communities.

**Faculty development shifted from being viewed as an external add-on to becoming an intellectually engaging and compelling part of the professional work of the individual and the institution.**

All 11 colleges created inquiry structures that fit their local campus culture. Some colleges created inquiry groups within departments, others created interdisciplinary groups. However, all these initial efforts were small. At each college, somewhere between seven and 40 faculty members participated; often these individuals were the “likely suspects” who take part in any innovation related to teaching. Time, support, and leadership will all be needed to ensure that these faculty inquiry groups are maintained, encouraged to grow, and integrated into the campus landscape.

One question that frequently arises in this age of growing accountability is, “Do faculty inquiry groups affect student learning?” Although some campuses saw modest gains in student learning and success connected to faculty inquiry groups (Bond, 2008), the question remains open—and challenging. The outcomes of professional development in higher education have rarely been articulated or evaluated in terms of faculty learning or, ultimately, student learning. In the K-12 literature, a growing body of research shows that when professional development is directly linked to curriculum and instruction, there are long-term benefits in student learning.<sup>8</sup> However, those studies have not yet been translated to the community college setting.

We need further research to understand the ways that faculty learning can contribute to student learning. Professional development is not an intervention by itself but can be an integrated part of any campus initiative to strengthen student success. For example, faculty inquiry can be linked to any educational task—curriculum development, instructional changes, introduction of technology, academic support, etc.—in ways that increase faculty engagement and chances of implementation. Ongoing inquiry as part of educational work can help faculty examine the ways an intervention affects student learning.

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Redefining professional development means making it part of the regular educational work of an institution. The challenge to the system is to create an infrastructure to support ongoing professional learning, growth, and development as well as to continue to study the outcomes in terms of professional learning and its contribution to student learning.

### **The Interconnection of Change/Ability**

Of course, these four dimensions of change/ability—**faculty leadership, knowledge of students, availability of data, and redefined professional development**—are all interconnected. Stimulating growth in one area of change can lead to growth in another area. Knowledge of students and use of data are

different starting points for generating information that can be used to strengthen student learning. Reconstructing faculty development with inquiry creates the need—and a receptive audience—for a wide range of data and evidence. And faculty leadership is the connective tissue that makes institutional learning and growth possible.

## Another Way to Think About Sustain/Ability

What is the relationship between these qualities of change/ability and longer term sustain/ability? Projects supported by external funds, whether from federal agencies or private foundations, regularly ask for plans on how a campus will continue the work with institutional funds after the grant period ends. Yet conventional wisdom recognizes how rarely the work actually continues. Projects initially funded with soft money too often disappear when the money runs out (Grubb et al., 1999, pp. 328–331). With this caution in mind, we began very early to talk with the campus coordinators and campus leadership about how their work would continue after SPECC. We recognized that the colleges would not necessarily be able to continue the exact programs that they had started as part of SPECC. Rather, we encouraged them to find ways to build on the SPECC work and weave what they had learned into their campus structure and life. In many ways we believed that the work continuing without the SPECC or Carnegie name would be a stronger indicator of success than the continuation of a particular, and possibly isolated, program.

Obstacles to change are easy to identify and frequently articulated. Inertia in a system keeps things as they have been. People hide behind the fact that “we’ve always done it this way,” or “we have tried that before, and it didn’t work.” Structural impediments, lack of resources, and even fear of change can loom large, inhibiting growth and preventing change. Yet, we have seen colleges experiment, learn, and grow. We believe that the same intellectual curiosity and commitment that made change possible can make its continuation equally possible.

Instead of thinking about the continuity of individual projects, we realized that sustainability could be accretive and grow by addition over time. In other words, rather than continuing to add self-contained programs, campuses might operate on a “LEGOs”-model where every additional piece overlaps structurally and connects to other components. Some of these early campus experiments may serve as warm-ups and rehearsals to get people more familiar with new ideas. In addition, such growth does not happen without leadership—at all levels, from classroom to campus—and attention. The experience of Merced College illustrates the ways a college can grow by connecting and integrating programs over time.

### DOLLARS AND CHANGE

Grant funds present an opportunity and a challenge to community colleges—an opportunity, because grants provide resources for programmatic innovations, and a challenge, because work started with external funds may disappear when the grant ends. We observed that the colleges used external funds as a resource for innovation and experimentation; many of the SPECC campus projects extended work begun with other grant support.

Examining the SPECC budgets gave us some insights into the ways campuses used the grant funds. There was a tension between abundance and frugality. The initial campus response to the grant was a sense of abundance and possibility. However, with a history of variable state funding, community colleges have become habitually frugal and are hesitant to spend money in the present when the future is unknown.



After reading *Honored but Invisible*, Norton Grubb's 1999 book about community college instruction, Merced's vice president of instruction invited the author to visit campus. Grubb led a series of seminars for faculty that inspired them to establish learning communities. Although the learning community program began small, it persevered through waves of variable funding. At the same time, Merced College established Supplemental Instruction (SI) in developmental mathematics and English through their participation in a Title V consortium to increase Hispanic student success. These two programs became the basis of their campus SPECC proposal. As part of SPECC, Merced expanded their learning communities and added the new dimension of faculty inquiry groups. Merced faculty who attended Reading Apprenticeship (RA) literacy training introduced a new set of literacy tools to their colleagues and began training SI leaders (both mathematics and English) in RA methods.<sup>9</sup> The campus SPECC

work made Merced a strong candidate for a grant from the Irvine Foundation to integrate academics and student services. Over time, more Merced faculty participated in different innovative programs and grew in leadership skills. By the second year of SPECC, Merced reported that they could not separate the work initiated through SPECC and other grants from the overall campus effort to improve basic skills instruction.

As noted above, colleges that were sophisticated in managing projects did not try and keep SPECC or other funded efforts separate from campus work. The most creative colleges connected activities that began as part of SPECC, such as faculty inquiry, with other educational responsibilities, including development of Student Learning Outcomes, accreditation self study, and collaboration with student services. That integration and blurring of boundaries made

continuation more likely. Perhaps another way to think about sustainability is not that the program visibly continues, but that the program principles intentionally and invisibly become part of the campus culture. Or perhaps sustainability is like digestion: ideas get broken down to basic components and become part of the regeneration of the cells, muscles, and organs of the institution.

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### **The Campus Story: Progress as Narrative**

The colleges that were most sophisticated about continuing work were intentional in their efforts to harvest knowledge from experience, build on what already existed, and connect new efforts to established programs and ideas. They found ways to direct new resources towards their own local goals rather than just accomplishing the goals of an external program or grant.

Crafting and telling a story gave participants a sense of where they had been and how to move forward. In his 2007 article "Counting and Recounting," Lee S. Shulman describes the importance of telling a story in numbers and words. Stories capture patterns and context and make details tangible. The colleges demonstrated that a well-crafted story can engage listeners so that they see themselves in the story.



Los Medanos College (LMC) faculty tell a compelling story about the needs of their campus, how they responded to those needs, and the ongoing challenge of meeting them. The story was told in several settings: their proposal to SPECC, personal conversations during the Carnegie team's visits to campus, and a formal conference presentation. Nancy Ybarra, a developmental education coordinator at Los Medanos, tells the story as follows:

Ten years ago we started looking at basic skills at our college. Our institutional research office conducted a retrospective study of student persistence: of the cohort of 177 students enrolled in a developmental English class two levels below transfer in fall 1993, how many had completed the transfer level English course by fall 1996? The answer was eight, or 4.5 percent. That number became a banner to mobilize action on our campus.

Looking at the data, we asked, "How is a basic skills program different from a collection of classes with support services?" The LMC Academic Senate created a Basic Skills Task Force of 17 members that included representatives from faculty, classified staff, and management. I was one of three faculty members the Task Force sent to the Kellogg Institute for Developmental Educators. Part of our participation in the Institute involved conducting projects on our home campus; my two colleagues developed curricula integrating reading and writing in English while I worked on the overall basic skills program design. The Task Force report was unanimously approved by the Academic Senate and formally accepted by the college administration. Bolstered by this campus-wide buy-in, we applied for a Title III grant to fund the plan we had already created. With support from the Title III grant we established a number of new positions, including college developmental education coordinators and developmental lead faculty in the mathematics and English departments.

To better communicate the concept of a program and how it differed from a collection of courses and services we created the visual metaphor of a tree: the earth surrounding the tree represented the campus mission while the trunk represented the program's main goal and purpose. Three connected branches represented the basic skills curriculum, student services, and professional development. We developed plans for each branch. Faculty redesigned the developmental education curriculum in mathematics and English. Student services were integrated into a counseling partnership with instructors. For example, students wrote their education plans as an assignment for their English class.

To strengthen professional development we created mathematics and English teaching communities and put a great deal of effort into codifying the changes in order to pass on that information to new full and part-time faculty. In a way, the binders and CDs we put together for this purpose constituted the "publication" of the story—writing it down so future audiences could read it. The SPECC grant was particularly important to us as a way of further capturing that work by representing it on a Web site where it would be both accessible and easily updated.

Often when people tell the story of an innovation or a grant they simply present the events in chronological order, rather than reconstructing the tale around a theme or focus. We asked the campuses to craft a story that would communicate to others the real, complex experience of learning and change—from their original questions and felt needs to what they had learned—noting along the

**A well-told story sums up the lessons learned on an individual campus and also makes it possible for those lessons, challenges, and victories to travel to other educational settings.**

way who the players had been and the dead ends or roads not taken. Recognizing the power of a campus narrative, the Carnegie SPECC team wove reflective questions into interim reports and we asked campuses to capture their experience in narrative form as part of their final report (see Appendix for examples of these questions). A well-told story sums up the lessons learned on an individual campus and also makes it possible for those lessons, challenges, and victories to travel to other educational settings.

### **Infrastructural Flexibility and Imagination**

The same imagination and intellectual vitality that made it possible for colleges to respond to new ideas also made it possible for the ideas to take root and grow. In fact, the fourth developmental stage of each of the change/ability characteristics is sustain/ability, the point where the innovation becomes incorporated into campus process and structure.

The initial stages of change/ability are grassroots; to a great extent they can be accomplished by faculty on their own initiative. These beginning stages of change attract people who may be a step or two outside of the mainstream, who are more willing to take risks. However, sustain/ability requires different players to move the innovation from the “garage” to the “main house” without killing the vitality or essence. This requires administrators who are creative and resourceful in building structures to support and extend the work. Vice presidents of instruction, division deans and department chairs think about structure, budgets, and positions. Savvy administrators know when to make gentle nudges or when to make bold moves.

The SPECC campuses afford numerous examples of administrators who worked to re-purpose existing structures or create programs that crossed campus boundaries, in order to incorporate and continue SPECC work.

- At the College of the Desert, the mathematics department created faculty inquiry groups to devise common assessments for developmental courses. These groups were successful in changing the climate and practice of the department. The vice president of instruction played a central role in the decision to designate these faculty inquiry groups as official campus committees so they would continue beyond grant funding; the English department is planning to create similar groups.

- The Teaching and Learning Center at Pasadena City College, begun with external funds, is a program that links faculty development directly to student learning communities. This unusual configuration allows student learning to be the ultimate goal with the classroom as a wide-open laboratory for faculty learning. In an interactive loop, ideas from the classroom stimulate faculty inquiry and, in turn, inquiry findings come back and shape the classroom. While the TLC had started outside the formal college hierarchy, the associate dean of academic support is now working to create a home in the campus structure and foster connections between the TLC and other units on campus. The TLC is being viewed as an incubator for ideas and models that can influence work across campus.
- At City College of San Francisco, the dean of liberal arts has supported the English faculty working group who are redesigning the integrated reading and writing curriculum. At each stage of experimentation, participating faculty generated hypotheses, tried new pedagogies, and grappled with data. The dean recognized inquiry as a powerful tool to redesign curriculum and instruction. This gave faculty the time and resources to ask important questions about student learning and explore what the answers look like in the classroom. In other words, the dean and faculty both agree that professional learning and development should be part of the educational work of faculty.

At the second and third project-wide convenings we brought together a group of vice presidents for instruction and deans from the participating colleges. This gave the administrators the same chance to meet, share ideas, and learn what was happening on other campuses as the faculty coordinators had. These conversations were generative. The administrators listened to other campuses' stories with an ear toward translating them to their own campus. For example, a story of how the English faculty at Glendale College had used release time to observe other faculty teach stimulated a conversation about creating on-campus "mini-sabbaticals" that let faculty spend time in each others' classrooms. The administrators discussed leveraging required college activities such as program review, enrollment management, and accreditation self-study as opportunities to prompt faculty engagement and inquiry. A final idea that emerged from this meeting of administrators was to create a resource network—both live and virtual—that could serve as a connector across campuses.

These administrators understood the importance of not trying to "institutionalize a program" but to cultivate and nurture a flexible model, an act that requires creativity and localization. Bill Farmer, the vice president of instruction at Cerritos College, who has a background in English literature, likened the administrative challenge to writing a sonnet: "how to give full creative expression to an idea within the constraints of a strict rhyme and metrics scheme."

**A community college administrator with a background in English literature likened the administrative challenge to writing a sonnet: "how to give full creative expression to an idea within the constraints of a strict rhyme and metrics scheme."**

## Conclusion: Learning and Community

Any teacher expects that students in a class will bring a range of backgrounds and experiences. If we look at the cohort of SPECC campuses through a teacher's eyes, it is not surprising that some campuses brought greater depth and breadth of experiences to the project. For those SPECC campuses that began the project with more experience and a clear sense of their own goals and direction, participation in SPECC worked as an accelerant. They were able to use the resources and activities of the grant program to advance their goals, and the flexibility of the action research design let those campuses move forward quickly. However, because of interaction—both formal and informal—among campuses there was value added for all the colleges. Working together as a community of campuses provided an efficiency in the system; the most experienced individuals and campuses grew stronger and those that had less local experience were able to grow in ways that would not have been possible working in isolation on their own campuses.

The campuses and individuals who participated in SPECC could see that they were part of, and partners in, a larger endeavor. Their work aimed to benefit their own campus and students, but it also contributed to a larger Carnegie effort of building knowledge. We created an environment of social learning that encouraged and even expected a willingness to share what was happening—successful or not. In fact, at all levels, seeing how colleagues or peer institutions addressed similar questions opened up the possibility of learning. When the coordinators could see their work in this broader context, and see the related work on other campuses, they gained not only new ideas to bring home, but new perspectives on their own work. In the same way that convenings opened windows to other campuses, faculty inquiry groups on the campuses opened windows onto the classroom for faculty.

As the SPECC project director, I had the pleasure of watching the campuses' efforts through my "Rose-colored glasses," though this did not mean I was uncritical. My colleagues and I were constantly learning as we watched the campus teams learn. It was exciting to see how all aspects of learning were interconnected. Student learning was at the heart of the whole SPECC endeavor. Faculty inquiry focused on understanding learning in the classroom, which in turn strengthened the faculty's sense of themselves as professional educators. The campus coordinators shared ideas and experiences and quickly learned from each other. Ideas moved across campuses. The coordinators drew on their local knowledge and made it possible for their institutions to learn. And the institutions themselves encompassed and incorporated these ideas into the campus culture.

Although SPECC concentrated on teaching and learning, it also contributes to a bigger picture of strengthening pre-collegiate education in community colleges. Committed allies and partners throughout the state and country are addressing vital issues such as equity, integration of student services, increasing research capacity, strengthening career and technical education, and creating policy—all of which are necessary if more basic skills students are to succeed.

We began SPECC with a healthy respect for the complexity and challenge of basic skills education. We end with a strongly reinforced belief that improving the learning and success of basic skills students is an issue worthy of the intellectual engagement and emotional commitment of all the talented individuals who are involved.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> SPECC ran from January 2005 to June 2008 and was organized by a team of Carnegie staff. Carnegie regranted approximately \$100,000 per year from the Hewlett Foundation to each of the 11 California community college campuses.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the importance of leadership in education literature, see John Gardner, Michael Fullan, and Jim Collins.

<sup>3</sup> *Reading Between the Lives* (McFarland et al., 2007) is available online at Internet Archive, a grantee of the Hewlett Foundation. The film is divided into four parts and can be viewed by using the following link: [http://www.archive.org/search.php?query=reading%20between%20the%20lives%20AND%20mediatype%3Amovies%20AND%20collection%3Aopensource\\_movies](http://www.archive.org/search.php?query=reading%20between%20the%20lives%20AND%20mediatype%3Amovies%20AND%20collection%3Aopensource_movies).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Teaching and Learning Center at Pasadena City College, see <http://www.pasadena.edu/tlc>.

<sup>5</sup> The term Generation 1.5 was used by R.G. Rumbaut and K. Ima in their 1988 report for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth,” to describe immigrants with both first and second generation characteristics.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Katie Hern’s Web site, “When Capable Students Fail: The Academic Sustainability Gap,” developed as part of the SPECC *Windows on Learning* gallery: <http://www.cfkeep.org/html/stitch.php?s=19612639508781&id=61821706184951>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the Visible Knowledge Project, see <http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/>.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, “Professional Development and Professional Community in the Learning-Centered School,” prepared by Judith Warren Little for the National Education Association in June, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the Reading Apprenticeship program developed by The Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd, see [http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/ra\\_framework.htm](http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/ra_framework.htm).

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## APPENDIX

As part of our work both to support the campus efforts and learn from them, we included reflective questions about their progress in all reports, from the original Request for Proposals to the final project report.

### Request for Proposals

Here we asked campuses to describe how the SPECC initiative would be connected to other institutional efforts to strengthen student success and to identify institutional resources available to support their proposed project.

#### *Excerpt from the RFP: Institutional Resources/Reform Alignment*

Is your campus engaged (or does it plan to engage) in institutional reform (e.g., reform of academic, administrative, financial, social/cultural policies practices) designed to support improved academic outcomes for low-income and minority students, especially those in pre-collegiate courses? If so please describe those efforts and the relationship to your plan for improving instruction in pre-collegiate mathematics and/or the English language arts.

Describe other campus resources—administrative support, institutional research capacity and commitment to using data for improvement, infrastructure for faculty development—that are available to support this effort.

### First Year

At the end of the first year we asked the campuses to write a summary report of activities to date and a proposal for the coming year. We included questions prompting them to reflect on their work and how they would build on that work in the future. Our goal was to give the campuses an opportunity for reflection and a chance to share what they were learning with others. The reports were posted on a private Web site where the campuses could read about each other's work.

#### *Questions from request for end of Year 1 report and proposal for Year 2:*

- What have been your major campus SPECC activities?
- Please describe your planned activities for the coming year (2006). How do they build on your first year's activities? What changes (if any) are you proposing?
- What have you learned during the first year that informs your plans for the coming year?
- In looking at your proposed plans and strategic decisions, why do you think this approach will be effective? What impediments do you anticipate? How do you plan to deal with them?



## Second Year

At the end of the second year, we asked the campuses to tell us their plans for sustainability: how would they continue the work started with SPECC support?

### *Excerpt from request for end of Year 2 report and proposal for Year 3:*

What aspects of the work—instruction in the classroom, faculty inquiry, and other activities—does the campus intend to continue? What will it take to do so? Who will need to be involved? What existing resources can be brought to bear? To what extent will new resources and/or reallocations be needed, and how will this be accomplished?

How will your earlier decisions about how to spend SPECC funds affect the institution's capacity to continue and build on SPECC work? For instance, if you used grant funds to pay stipends for participants in faculty inquiry groups, how will the lack of stipends affect expectations for participation? If grant funds paid for release time for project coordinators, how will those roles be supported in the future? We are interested in your rationale for the use of external funds.

How do you expect the work to change over the next few years? What circumstances might make modifications wise or necessary? How can the work and resources of the project be used to leverage further efforts?

In addition to sustaining work on your own campus, how will your efforts contribute to the larger agenda of knowledge and field-building that is part of SPECC?

## Final Report

For the final report we asked the campuses to look back over their project as a whole. The final report had three parts: a summary of 500 words to be posted on the SPECC Web site, a reflective essay, and a chronology of activities.

### *Excerpt from request for Final Report:*

The reflective essay should be three to five pages and tell the story of your campus effort in a bit more detail: what you have done, what you have learned and how you will build on it. The final part of the essay should be a short section on sustainability, how your campus will continue (or is continuing) the work begun as part of SPECC.



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