

Excellence in Teaching and Teacher's Resource Center Research Project Summary

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Problem:

What is excellence in teaching? What are the means through which faculty can better promote student success? These questions have been examined by numerous scholars over the years and continue to be a vibrant topic of conversation and inform policy here at College of Marin (CoM). The report that follows summarizes my research on excellence in teaching at CoM undertaken over the last year (Fall 2018 - Fall 2019). Below I provide a brief overview of my reasoning, research design, and findings from this study.

Reasoning:

The extant body of research on excellence in teaching and its relationship to student success generally rests on two assumptions:

1. **The Instructor-Defined Market** - The idea that student success is directly related to an instructor's ability "to meet students where they are at" through the development and use of innovative multi-pronged pedagogical strategies targeted toward different learning styles. This approach strongly suggests student underperformance and/or failure is the result of faculty's inability to deploy the appropriate pedagogical tools to overcome various pre-existing inequities between students in the classroom. In essence, when student's struggle it is because the instructor has not identified and employed the right "marketing strategies" to get students to successfully participate in the educational marketplace.
2. **Endurance Makes for Success** - Research commonly makes it seem as though the world of higher education is a survivor sport. The California Community College's Chancellor's Office and by extension all California Community Colleges tend to measure success via measures like "Time to Degree", "Course Attrition", and "Persistence" to name a few, and in the process make it seem as though attending community college is something to be endured and suffered through.

Combined these two assumptions suggest that faculty should be developing teaching strategies that encourage students to better endure the learning process and ultimately, make it more tolerable. They also suggest that when student's do not earn their degrees in two years, are not persistent, and do not show the "grit" that in recent years has become a popular topic of discussion in higher education that faculty are not offering the right "product" in the classroom.

I argue that prior research and policy relying on the above noted approaches are problematic on two accounts. First, they employ an overly deterministic view of what takes place inside the classroom and in the process, deny the agency of students in the educational marketplace.

Faculty alone don't define the market. Perhaps the reason changes in pedagogical strategies are often unsuccessful is not because faculty are employing the wrong tools - say from a standard-based model of grading to an equity-based model - but because new and different pedagogical strategies are not what student's actually want from their instructors. Second, and as noted above, these approaches make it seem as though education is a survivor sport, and that they only goal is to make it through. Any good educator will tell you that we should set much higher standards for ourselves than this. We should not simply help students just enough to survive the system, but should pursue student engagement - understanding of and the ability to thrive within the educational system.

The research that follows breaks from the above-noted assumptions of prior scholarship by recognizing that students have agency and important insights for understanding what they need to be successful in their educational journeys. It also seeks to move beyond endurance-related markers of success and focus on those factors that promote greater student engagement. In doing so, this study attempts to put the consumer (student) first and investigates what they want from their instructors and in turn, what factors not only encourage persistence, but more importantly, heightens engagement in the classroom.

Design:

This project was divided into three stages. In the first stage, I sought to test the "standard, instructor-defined model" of student success outlined above. Specifically, I examined the long-term performance outcomes of students enrolled in a linked program with the now defunct First Generation Scholars Program (FGS) and my Introduction to Sociology class in the Fall of 2016. In collaboration with Caitlin Escobar, I developed several interventions (innovative pedagogical strategies) designed to promote greater persistence, student engagement, and ultimately long-term success at CoM. Below, under **Findings**, is a list of the various interventions we attempted and their assessed impact on student outcomes.

The second stage of the project took a more student (consumer) side approach to understanding student success. Specifically, I sought to identify what qualities/teaching strategies that students suggest keep them engaged in their courses and appreciate most in their instructors. To explore these issues, I met with and interviewed several CoM counselors in the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019 and asked them to share some of things students tell them keep them engaged in their education. I chose to interview counselors because they tend to maintain the closest and longest lasting relationships with students of any faculty group on campus. It thus serves to reason that students would be more likely to disclose their feelings about what various faculty do to inhibit and/or facilitate their engagement in their classes. I've provided a list of the six most common qualities students desire in their instructors in the **Findings** section of this report.

The third and final stage of this project built directly from the findings from the second stage. Specifically, counselors frequently named faculty who students identified as embodying the qualities that they desire most in the classroom. In turn, those faculty were contacted and asked to participate in several meetings/focus groups to discuss what the college can do to better

support faculty in their attempt to better meet students' stated needs on campus. Below I've provided a list of the various issues and ideas brought up during these meetings.

Findings:

Stage 1: Intervention Review:

1. Class Composition - Mixed Classes vs. FGS Only Classes; Peer Role Models
 - a. No Positive Impact
2. Tutoring - Recommended Tutoring vs. Mandatory Tutoring
 - a. Mandatory Tutoring - Positive Impact on Endurance-Related Outcomes (Persistence, Continued Tutoring, Math and English Completion)
3. Office Hours - Mandatory Office Hours
 - a. No Positive Impact - Note Few Students Attended Office Hours Even When Mandatory
4. In-Class Faculty Collaboration - Caitlin and I Visited Each Other's Classes
 - a. Positive Impact on Student Engagement (Excitement for Class; Participation in Class Discussion; Comfortability)
5. Faculty/Counseling/Tutoring Check-Ins
 - a. Positive Impact on Endurance-Related and Student Engagement Outcomes
6. Integrated Assignments - Clear Link Between Course Assignments
 - a. No Positive Impact

Stage 2: Student Disclosures to Counselors

1. Organization/Consistency - Students like to know what to expect from their faculty. Examples: clear syllabi, daily outlines, a clear understanding of how the class works.
2. Passion - Students feel inspired when their faculty are unafraid to show just how much they love what they do and/or their discipline. Key quote: "They love it when their instructors 'geek out'".
3. Authenticity - Students feel engaged when their faculty are honest and real with them. They can sense when faculty are being disingenuous and in turn, they feel alienated. Students are not looking to be friends with faculty, but they would like to "know who their faculty are." All interviewees suggested that this quality was inherently linked to Passion (listed above).
4. Accessibility - Students feel more engaged when their faculty are accessible to them outside the classroom. Examples: showing up to office hours, inviting students to attend office hours, and keeping your door open when holding office hours.

5. Dedicated - Students care when they feel their faculty care. Lectures do not have to be entertaining, but students appreciate it when it is clear that their faculty care enough to prepare. This also applies outside the classroom. Students get excited when they see faculty at events outside the classroom. Key quote: “They are just making it up as they go. They didn’t prepare for the day and it shows.”
6. Approachable - Students want to be engaged in their education and connected to their faculty. They are here and eager, but they don’t always understand the ins-and-outs of the system. Simply being open, friendly, and welcoming goes a long way. It helps them to feel like they belong and are not the outsiders/imposters that many of them fear they are.

Please note that each of the aforementioned qualities/traits were discussed by each of the counselors interviewed for this study. While other faculty qualities/traits were identified by different interviewees the data weren’t consistent enough to warrant being presented in this summary.

Each counselor was asked whether students ever identified and/or discussed which pedagogical strategies they found most helpful in the classroom - i.e. group work, movies, powerpoint, and so on - and they all provided the same answer, “no.” Instead each emphasized that students felt more connected and engaged with faculty who demonstrated one or more of the qualities/traits (listed above).

Stage 3: Teaching Resource Working Group Themes

1. Concerns -
 - Institutional: Group participants expressed concern that the administration and many of their colleagues believe that CoM instructors are inherently “bad” at their jobs. This feeling derives from the “constant search for experts from outside the college who tell us what we are doing wrong and what we must do to be better.” Group participants suggested that this approach is alienating and leaves many faculty feeling blamed. They also said that it gives the impression that the administration does not trust the faculty as people or their expertise in figuring things out as individuals and/or as a collective body. Key quote: “The College says it is interested in diversity, but not in the diversity of teaching found on campus.”
 - Students: Group participants expressed concern for what they called a “Culture of Efficiency” taking shape at CoM and in higher education in general. They were particularly concerned by the Chancellor’s Office and CoM’s focus on “time to graduation” and the development of discrete educational tracks (or pathways). They connected the aforementioned “Culture of Efficiency” to heightened student anxiety and agitation on campus. They cited the elimination of lower division math and English classes in the wake of AB 705 as a direct source of heightened student anxiety. They

further suggested that the situation could have been handled better. Key quote: “Aren’t community colleges about exploration and self-discovery? We (the college) are making students more anxious. It’s ridiculous.”

2. Suggestions –

- Teacher’s Resource Center - Group participants suggested that faculty would benefit from a Teacher’s Resource Center, a permanent facility on campus designed to support excellence in teaching. They were clear that this center should be guided by the needs, concerns, and expertise of faculty on campus. “It should be what faculty need to be, not what the administration thinks it should be.” They argued the Teaching Resource Center should offer the following:
 1. Internal Programming: Rotating talks on different teaching philosophies/styles employed by different faculty across campus. These talks would provide faculty an open-forum to discuss with their colleagues what they think works and doesn’t work in their classroom(s). Group participants emphasized that diverse faculty from all departments need be invited to participate in these forums/presentations. They also said these forums would allow faculty to introduce specific problem solving solutions that directly relate to campus life at CoM, as opposed to “the solutions frequently offered by outside programming that are far too vague.”
 2. Standing Teacher’s Resource Committee: A committee of faculty who possess expertise in different domains of instruction. The committee would serve as a resource to all faculty - a place where they can bring their questions and problem solve.
 3. Peer-Driven Labs and One-on-One Counseling - Led by expert faculty serving on Teacher’s Resource Committee members.
 4. Office Hours - Teachers Resource Committee members offer “office hours” to support colleagues within the Center.
 5. Support Innovation in Teaching - Greater support for electives and other innovative practices. Interdisciplinary Themed Classes were discussed.