STUDENT SUCCESS COURSES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

An Exploratory Study of Student Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines the Student Success course in two urban community colleges in the Northeast. Through analysis of student interview data, we find that the Student Success course helps students learn about the college, receive course advice, and develop stronger study skills. The course also acts as a catalyst for building important relationships with professors and peers that help students integrate into the social and academic fabric of the college. We also find that individual benefits that accrue from the course reinforce one another to create even greater outcomes that have long-lasting impacts. The Student Success course may therefore serve as a useful strategy in helping community college students persist and earn degrees.

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Introduction

In keeping with their mission to help students from all backgrounds attain a college education, community colleges have implemented an array of student support services. One delivery method for some of these services, the Student Success course (also called College 101, Introduction to College, Student Orientation, or Freshman Experience), aims to help new students learn about the institution and be successful there. In this paper we use interview data from students at two community colleges to examine this course. We find that students gain useful knowledge and develop important relationships by participating in the course.

Background

A principal mission of community colleges is to provide postsecondary education for students who may not otherwise be able to attend college. Because of their convenient locations, open access admission policies, and relatively low costs, community colleges tend to enroll a greater proportion of students from groups that are socially, economically, and academically disadvantaged than do four-year colleges. For example, nearly 30 percent of community college students are Black or Hispanic, compared to 20 percent of students enrolled in four-year public and private postsecondary institutions (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Approximately one fourth of community college students come from families earning 125 percent or less of the federal poverty level, compared to one fifth of four-year college students (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Entering freshmen at community colleges are more likely to take at least one remedial course than are their peers at four-year colleges, and are likely to need to spend a longer time taking such courses (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

The difficulty in providing education for many of the nation's hardest-to-serve students may well be reflected in the success rates of community college students. Completion rates at community colleges are strikingly low. Only 45 percent of community college students earn a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years of initial enrollment (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2006). While 8 percent remain enrolled, 47 percent leave school without earning a credential. Although these statistics include some students who enter

community college with goals other than degree attainment or transfer, it is clear that many community college students do not persist toward an educational credential.

In order to help students overcome barriers to success and thereby improve completion rates, community colleges have implemented a variety of student support services. These services take many forms to address students' varied needs. They may include guidance and counseling focused on academics and/or careers, academic supports such as tutoring, or personal assistance such as child care, among other things (Purnell & Blank, 2004). The prevailing philosophy is that such services can improve student outcomes by providing students with additional resources and opportunities to become well-integrated into the college environment (see Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, for a review of the motivations and empirical rationales for offering such services). In addition, providing student services can be understood as compensatory, helping disadvantaged students overcome their potential lack of information, cultural capital, or academic preparedness.

Despite a widespread recognition that support services are important for disadvantaged students, researchers have pointed out that their efficacy has not been adequately demonstrated. Research on their effectiveness is sparse (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Grubb, 2001). Bailey and Alfonso note that much of the literature on the effectiveness of student supports focuses on four-year college populations, whose needs differ from students enrolled in community colleges. They also note that data to rigorously evaluate program effectiveness are not widely available.

One particular way in which a range of student support services can be delivered is through a Student Success course. This course, usually aimed at new students, provides participants with information about a given college, assistance in academic and career planning, and an introduction to techniques to improve study habits and other personal skills. The goal is to orient students to the various services offered at the college, help them acclimate to the college environment, and give them the tools they need to be successful in postsecondary education.

There is a body of literature that generally indicates an association between participation in a Student Success course and a range of positive outcomes. For example, Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found significantly greater retention for students who enrolled in the "freshman seminar" at a public four-year university. Similarly, Boudreau and Kromrey (1994) found a positive relationship between completion of the course and retention and academic performance. These two studies used a matched comparison group design. Derby (2007) and Derby and Watson

(2006) focused particularly on the relationship between course participation and retention of minority-group students with more mixed results. And, in contrast to most other studies, their sample students were from a community college.

A recent large-scale study has been conducted by our colleagues at the Community College Research Center, using data from all 28 of Florida's community colleges (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). This study tracked an entire cohort of students over 17 terms (five and two-thirds years), comparing those who enrolled in a Student Success course (called a Student Life Skills, or SLS, course in Florida) with those who did not, and using logistic regressions to control for student characteristics. The researchers found that students who enrolled in an SLS course were more likely than their peers to complete a credential over the time period of the study. The same students also had increased chances of persistence and of transfer to the Florida state university system.

This base of quantitative work provides a promising picture, then, of the influence these courses may have on student persistence and credential attainment. More quantitative research is, however, needed to firmly establish a causal relationship between Student Success courses and positive student outcomes. Yet, what is lacking as well is a qualitative exploration of these courses through the eyes of students themselves. Such research may begin to illustrate how particular course content lends itself to student support.

The present study begins to build this qualitative body of knowledge. We sought to examine the institutional and personal factors that contribute to or hinder students' persistence in the community college. The student success course was initially just one of many areas explored in student interviews; however, it soon became apparent that the course was very important in influencing behaviors associated with persistence. Thus, our findings on the student success course are emergent and inductive; additional research is needed.

Methods and Data

We conducted a qualitative study of student persistence in community colleges in order to explore, among other things, how institutional support services might influence student progress toward a degree. Participants in the study were students from two urban community colleges in the Northeast enrolling significant numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students (we refer to these institutions by pseudonyms, Northern Community College and Eastern Community College). We conducted interviews with the students during their second semester of enrollment, ¹ and re-interviewed the students six months later, whether they remained enrolled or not.

Students were randomly selected from a list of all first-time enrollees in fall 2005 who persisted to spring 2006. Non-matriculating and continuing education students, as well as those who already had earned a postsecondary degree elsewhere, were excluded. Letters of invitation to participate in the study were sent to 176 students; each potential participant was also contacted by telephone at least three times at various times of the day in order to secure their participation in the study. Participants were offered a \$100 cash stipend (\$50 per interview). Due to a low take-up rate, we supplemented the sample using a snowball technique for the recruitment of additional students.

Forty-six students agreed to participate and were interviewed in the spring semester. Two students were later dropped from the sample because they did not meet the selection criteria. Our final sample included 44 students from the two colleges. The top row of Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

During the summer and fall, multiple efforts through telephone calls, mailings, emails, and text messages were made to maintain contact with the participants and then schedule follow-up interviews. We were able to re-interview 36 of the 44 students in the original sample. The fall 2006 responses of the students in the sample, as well as responses by student demographics, are shown in the bottom three rows of Table 1.

The difficulty we had in recruiting and following up with students for the study, even while offering a cash stipend, may well be an indicator of the many demands and barriers faced

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¹ Since we were interested in the progress of degree-seeking students, we included in the study only students who persisted to a second semester of enrollment, thereby excluding those students who might be considered "experimenters" or who otherwise might not have had degree completion goals.

by students as they seek a postsecondary credential. Through telephone conversations with students, we determined that the low take-up and follow-up rates were due primarily to the many demands on students' time. Between school, work, and familial responsibilities, even an hourlong interview was impossible to schedule for many students. In addition, a significant number of students or their families did not speak English and so did not understand the nature of the research or were reluctant to participate in an interview.

Table 1: First-round participants and second-round responses by college and demographics

	Eastern CC	Northern CC	Female	Male	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	Unknown
First round participants (N=44)	25	19	28	16	11	14	10	7	2
Second round participants (N=36)	21	15	22	14	8	13	8	6	1
Unable to Schedule* (N=5)	3	2	4	1	3	0	0	1	1
No Response** (N=3)	1	2	2	1	0	1	2	0	0

^{*} Participants who did not appear for a scheduled interview, or students we spoke to but with whom we never scheduled a second interview in fall 2006.

During both waves of data collection, interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. They were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The spring 2006 interviews focused on students' initial experiences in college. We asked about their reasons for enrolling; goals; first and second semester courses; whether or not they were enrolled in the Student Success course, and if enrolled, their perceptions of and experiences in

^{**} Participants who never responded to repeated phone calls and flier attempts to schedule the second interview in fall 2006.

the course; and their use and knowledge of student services, such as counseling and tutoring. Finally, we asked about the challenges participants foresaw in completing their degree; where and from whom they sought and gained support and information about the college; and what the college could do to make it easier for them to progress toward a degree. The fall 2006 interviews focused on students' decisions to continue in college or not, and the challenges they faced in progressing toward their degree goals. We probed, in particular, for how the knowledge and use of the institutional services available to them contributed (or did not contribute) to their progress toward a degree.

To gain a better understanding of the services offered at each institution, we conducted interviews with a range of college staff members. These included the college president, the vice president of student services, the coordinator of developmental education, the director of advising, the director of additional support programs, and the director of tutoring. In total, we interviewed seven staff members at Eastern and six staff members at Northern. In addition to staff interviews, we observed several Student Success courses at both colleges.

The transcribed student interviews were uploaded to NVivo, a software program for analyzing qualitative data. We created codes addressing student knowledge and use of services. We also created codes that focused on the Student Success course; these addressed whether or not students took the course, whether they found it to be helpful, and what types of information students received from the course. We also coded student attributes, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, as well as student progress toward a degree.

Once the transcripts were coded, we read the interviews thematically, examining the ways that students discussed various aspects of their college experience and environment. For example, we read all transcript sections related to student participation in the Student Success course, as well as all sections related to advising. We sought out themes that emerged from the data.

Description of the Student Success Courses

Both colleges in our sample offered a Student Success course, though the goals and focus of each varied slightly.

Northern Community College

According to interviews with a college administrator, the goal of the Student Success course at Northern Community College is to prepare students to succeed in an academic setting. To achieve this aim, the course helps students learn about the college services that are available, such as tutoring or those offered at the transfer center; study techniques; time management skills; and how to develop educational and career plans. The course also seeks to provide an environment where students forge relationships with the professor of the course and develop a sense of belonging within the college community.

The one-semester, one-credit course meets weekly for fifty-five minutes. Seasoned faculty members from the disciplines as well as college advisors teach the course. Course credit is transferable to other colleges in the state.

The course is intended to serve traditional college students — recent high school graduates who attend college full time. Northern strongly encourages all first-semester, full-time students to take the course. Although it is not technically required for graduation, advisors automatically register students with this profile for the course; of the students in our sample, all but one first-time, full-time student took the course. Thus, it appears to be a de facto requirement for these students.

Part-time students, however, are not automatically enrolled in the course and generally do not take it. In part, this is due to the extra cost they would incur by taking an additional credit of coursework. (Full-time students incur no extra cost because they pay a flat-rate, full-time tuition fee.) In addition, if students begin their college careers as part-time students and later become full-time, they are not required to take the course.

Finally, students who are struggling academically are often encouraged by a counselor to enroll in the Student Success course if they have not yet taken it. One Northern college

administrator explained, "If it's a part-time student who didn't do as well as they should have, we'll push their taking the course more aggressively."

In our sample, 10 out of 19 Northern students were enrolled in the Student Success course. All were enrolled full time in their first semester of college. Of the remaining 9 students who did not take the Student Success course, 7 were enrolled part time in their first semester, one student was in a certificate program and explained that she was not required to take the course, and the other student was enrolled full time and was unaware that full-time students were compelled to take the course. Northern student participation in the Student Success course by enrollment status is shown in the top row of Table 2.

Eastern Community College

The goals of the Student Success course at Eastern were similar to those at Northern. At Eastern, college staff expected the course to prepare students to succeed in an academic setting by learning communication, study, and time management skills, and by introducing students to the support services available at their institution. Also similar to Northern, the course helps students prepare for careers by examining the culture of the workplace and the credentials necessary for particular occupations.

The Student Success course at Eastern meets once a week for 50 minutes for one semester. It is taught by seasoned faculty and college advisors. Students earn one credit for the course, which is transferable to other colleges in the state.

Unlike at Northern, the Student Success course at Eastern is directed toward *all* students entering the college, whether or not they are enrolled full or part time. The course is required for graduation, and so all students must enroll at some point during their tenure. We found that several Eastern students in our sample took the course during their second semester rather than their first.

In our sample, 21 out of 25 Eastern students took the Student Success course; of these 21 students, 18 attended full time and 3 attended part time in their first semester of college. Four Eastern students did not take the Student Success course; three of them were full-time students and one was a part-time student. Eastern student participation in the Student Success course by enrollment status is shown in the bottom row of Table 2.

Table 2: Participation in Student Success course by college and enrollment status

	Took Student Succ	cess course	Did not take Student Success course			
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Other	
Northern CC (N=19)	10	0	1	7	1	
Eastern CC (N=25)	18	3	3	1	N/A	

Findings

Reported Benefits to Participation

As we analyzed the data, it became clear that students generally found the course to be beneficial in a variety of ways: they gained information about the college, developed skills and techniques that could help them in their academic endeavors, and built important relationships with others. These benefits reinforced one another to bring about behaviors that supported persistence.

Information

Students reported that the Student Success course was a convenient, one-stop location to receive a variety of useful information in a coherent way; this contrasted with how they reported that information was otherwise made available. Community colleges provide a wealth of information to students on topics ranging from graduation requirements and course schedules to available support services, student events, and clubs. This information is made available through a variety of sources, including advisors, professors, and printed materials such as fliers and course catalogs. Students reported, however, that many of these information sources were not well-coordinated and were often difficult to access. This finding is exemplified through a

response one Eastern student had to the question, "What is the worst thing about your school?" The student explained,

I think they could help out students much better because when I first came in here I didn't see a lot of people helping new students out. They just tell you to go here or go there, but when you get to the B point, where the people who were in the A section [tell you to go], and the B people tell you to go back to A and tell them that they don't have that information. And they keep on pushing you around here and there, and you're just stuck in the middle because you don't know where to go. (EF22)

Students who did find useful information described how they typically encountered the information haphazardly, for example, from a flier posted on a bulletin board or through an impromptu run-in with a professor or peer. This meant that they often did not get the information they needed in ways that were useful to them or at appropriate times in their educational trajectories. They do not appear to have had consistent and reliable sources for information.

In contrast, students reported that the Student Success course was a user-friendly location for receiving valuable information. As a result, they found that they were able to make use of the information gained through the course more effectively than that gained through other sources. They reported that the course helped alleviate much of the confusion they felt when using other information sources, and they reported that they felt the information received through the course was more trustworthy than information received elsewhere. This was particularly the case for information in two areas: college resources and course selection.

College-related information and resources. Students in our sample reported that the Student Success course provided them with information about the services available at the college, such as personal counseling, college advising, tutoring, transfer advising, and student activities. The course was an important avenue through which students became knowledgeable about the resources available at the college. Students who did not take the Student Success course reported receiving information about college services through random interactions with professors, peers, and general college advisors. These interactions gave students some information about the resources available at the college, yet students did not receive a full picture of the services available. Additionally, not all students experienced these interactions and were thus left without a satisfactory understanding of the resources offered at the college.

Why was the Student Success course more effective in presenting this type of information than other sources? First, the course enabled students to engage in small and large group discussions and complete assignments that focused on institutional services. For example, students were often required to read their student handbook in order to familiarize themselves with the services offered at the college. Students found this exercise helpful, with one student saying, "I got to know more of the things that are available in college. I never knew about the tutoring until I really got to read the student handbook" (EF22). Second, course visits from various college representatives provided information to students. Student EF22, for example, learned about a specialized support program for which she was eligible through a speaker who came to her Student Success course. Finally, the Student Success course included guided tours to the various campus support services offices. Students said that these tours helped them identify where important offices were located on campus, and connected them directly to the staff in those offices. Our analysis indicates that as a result of these activities, students who participated in the Student Success course generally knew about more services available to them than did students not enrolled in the course, and they likewise had more accurate information about the services.

Information on courses and course selection. Students also found the information about course selection and graduation requirements gained through the Student Success course to be more useful than that gained through other avenues, such as college advisors. A course advising session for first-year students at the two colleges in our sample usually consisted of a short meeting with a college advisor prior to course registration. Students met with whichever counselor was available, and if they had follow-up questions, they usually met later with a different counselor. Students often reported feeling rushed during these meetings, and they said that the meetings rarely focused on long-term goals or planning. And some students reported receiving contradictory or inaccurate information during this process.

It appears that the Student Success course remedied some of the confusion students felt when using the general college advisors. Students in our sample reported receiving information and guidance regarding program planning and course selection in their Student Success course. This occurred through individual meetings with their Student Success professor, course presentations from general college advisors, and projects. For example, during a classroom observation at Eastern Community College, we observed the professor inviting the students to

meet with her after class to register for classes if they had not already done so. (At both schools, Student Success professors were permitted to register students in lieu of college advisors.) When the class ended there was a long line of students waiting to meet with the professor (11/22/06).

A study by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (2007) found that students perceived faculty to be their best source for academic advising. Our research indicates similar findings. Many students in our sample felt that they received good advising from their Student Success professors and met with them on more than one occasion to choose a major, select courses, and gain advice on which professors to take. Unlike the general college advisors, their Student Success professors knew the students on a personal level and could suggest courses that fit into their academic and career plans. These professors became important "tools" that students used to gain valuable information. One student explained,

And my [Student Success] professor ... if anything, if I needed to talk to her, to go up to her, she helped me a lot. She helps me keep up my work, and you know she looked at my schedule, the best professors to take, just to keep me on track. (NF26)

Students who took the Student Success course also received information on course selection and program planning in other ways. For example, a student described how a general college advisor came in to speak to the class and went over the programs and degrees available at the college. The advisor also handed out program-specific check-off sheets that enabled students to keep track of what courses they had already taken toward their major and what additional courses were necessary to complete their major requirements (NF25). Students also completed a project on their major. They focused on what career options were available through their major, including how much money they could earn and what steps were necessary to achieve their career aspirations. Many students noted that the information they gained from doing projects like this was useful in pursuing their academic and career goals.

Previous research suggests that there is a relationship between poor academic advising and attrition. One study found that students who reported having high-quality advising dropped out at a rate that was 25 percent lower than students who reported receiving poor advising, and 40 percent lower than students who said they received no advisement whatsoever (Mezner, 1989). In the present study, students reported receiving important course advising and useful information through the Student Success course, particularly as compared to other sources of

course information. Presumably, in accordance with previous findings, the information received through the Student Success course will help them persist in college.

Skills to support academic progress

Community college students often have many other commitments besides their studies, such as taking care of family members or working full time. A recent national study found that 57 percent of community college students work more than 20 hours per week, and 34 percent of students spend 11 or more hours per week caring for dependents (CCSSE, 2007). Given these challenges, personal skills such as time management and effective studying may be crucial to student success. Many community college experts believe that focusing on personal habits and skills may be just as important for promoting student achievement as emphasizing basic reading and mathematics skills (Boylan, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students in our sample reported that the Student Success course did help them develop the time management and study skills they needed to be successful.

How did the Student Success course encourage the development of these skills? First, the course curriculum included lectures on strategies for managing time. Explained one student,

What I learned about it is if you don't use your time wisely, as far as your schoolwork, and you procrastinate, you're never going to get anything done. It's just not going to work, especially if you're 46 years old and you've got a million other things revolving around your life, the time that you do have, if you let it go, you're never going to be able to catch up and get to the goal that you want to reach. (EF7)

Second, course activities helped students learn about and practice effective academic habits. During one course observation, for example, students were completing presentations of note-taking techniques (11/20/06). This helped the student presenters practice such techniques while teaching their peers about this useful skill. In another student presentation, students discussed good study habits, highlighting examples of how to study effectively, such as by forming study groups. One student reflected on the purpose of learning these skills in the Student Success course:

Then in class we would go over study skills from the book we had to get. We talked about studying in school. And it had to do with learning study skills, creating time for yourself, being organized, stuff like that so you can get through college better. (NM25)

Relationships

Relationships with peers, college staff, and professors are hypothesized to be particularly important because they can help students integrate into the social and academic fabric of a school, thereby encouraging them to persist to a degree (Tinto, 1993). Yet, it is often difficult for community college students to forge such relationships because of the myriad demands on their time. Students in our sample reported that the Student Success course helped them form relationships with professors and peers that would not otherwise have occurred, thereby increasing their integration into the college.

The course encouraged these relationships in a number of ways. Of primary importance was the course's emphasis on student participation. Students were often required to contribute to class discussions and activities, which helped them develop a level of comfort in the college and gain the confidence necessary to create relationships with peers and professors. The emphasis on oral communication created a community within the Student Success classroom, encouraging students to reach out to one another. Explained one student,

I think the Student Success class is to kind of crack that shy shell, to try to get you to talk to more people. My professor, he was great; he'd try to get you into it. I think he'd get us as much into it as possible. It wasn't like everyone was talking, but people were kind of talking, kind of socializing and he was trying to encourage that.... So I think that's Northern Community College's way of showing people that it's okay to talk. (NM6)

Also, the emphasis on participation and group activities allowed students to get to know one another and meet peers with whom they could find things in common. One Northern student described how she met a close friend through her Student Success course. The two were paired for a group discussion and realized they were from the same city in Germany. She explained how they "instantly connected" (NF25). Another student said that the most important aspect of the course was that it helped him to make friends (NM25).

These relationships transcended the boundaries of the Student Success course and, as predicted by Tinto (1997), created a broader sense of integration into the college for students. For many students in our sample, the Student Success course served as a gateway to integration into college life. For example, one student (EF22) explained that the course helped her become more comfortable participating in other courses. She explained that because participation was a

critical aspect of the Student Success course, she became accustomed to participating in class discussions, asking questions aloud when she felt unsure or confused, and talking with her peers. This comfort allowed her to feel confident participating in discussions and asking questions in her other courses.

Likewise, as a result of the guided tours and classroom visits from institutional support service staff, students said that just knowing where the services were on campus and whom to talk to for particular issues that arose increased their level of comfort on campus. One Northern student explained this phenomenon:

It was really interesting to see all the possibilities that you would probably not find out by yourself if you just walked through the college. But now you feel more comfortable; now you know the library and you know who to ask if you were looking for something. (NF25)

Overall, the course encouraged relationships with professors, other students, and service providers, which helped students become familiar with campus life and led to a feeling of comfort and integration on campus.

Magnification of Individual Benefits

The reported benefits described above are no doubt important, but can be gained through avenues other than a Student Success course. It is fair to ask, then, Why spend student and institutional resources on such a course? Analysis of the interviews revealed that the course itself is important because it provides benefits that extend beyond the information students receive or the relationships they develop. The components of the Student Success course appear to work together to create complementarities that students cannot accrue through other venues. In other words, within the context of the Student Success course, the individual benefits reinforce one another to create even greater outcomes with long-lasting impacts.

Information plus comfort leads to the use of services

Students need to actually use support services, not just know about them, in order to benefit. This means that students need to know how to access a service and feel comfortable doing so. The Student Success course encourages both of these processes, thereby helping

students take advantage of services in a way that just learning about them, or just feeling comfortable on campus, would not.

Tutoring is a prime example of this. At both colleges, tutoring was a widely publicized support service, and most students learned about it from a variety of sources. However, students in our sample who took the Student Success course were much more likely to actually attend tutoring sessions than those students who did not. Fifty-eight percent of students who took the Student Success course made use of tutoring, whereas 23 percent of students who did not take the course did so.

Given the small size of our sample and the exploratory nature of the study, we cannot assume there is a causal relationship in this association, yet it is important to remember that students in the study usually enrolled in Student Success because they were required to do so, not because they were more motivated or more conscientious than students who did not enroll. The association might also be explained by the fact that one of the sample schools required the Student Success course for full-time students only; students who did not take the course were more likely to be enrolled part time and thus would have less time to access campus resources. However, in analyzing the interview data, a strong theme arose in which many students who took the Student Success course described how comfortable they felt accessing campus resources. They indicated that activities in the Student Success course encouraged that comfort. It appears that an increased level of comfort, rather than solely acquiring the relevant information, is an important factor in encouraging students' use of support services.

Students reported that the structure of the Student Success course had much to do with their use of the tutoring center. As we have noted, they learned about the service through their course. This basic information was the first step in making use of the service. However, personal relationships that developed in the course served to create additional encouragement. First, the personal contact that came from tutoring center personnel visits to the Student Success course made students feel more comfortable visiting the tutoring center later on. As one student explained, "She [the Student Success professor] brought counselors and advisors to the classroom to speak with us on college, majors, tutoring, a lot of things to encourage us to continue to come. 'Don't be afraid to use them, use their assistance'" (EF11). These visits felt more inviting than other information sources such as fliers, thereby increasing the likelihood that students would actually make use of tutoring.

The campus tours offered through the Student Success course achieved similar effects by informing students while simultaneously raising their comfort level. Because students were actually able to visit those offices and talk to people in a structured way, they were less intimidated when it came time to access them.

Relationships plus course advising leads to good advising

As we have noted, many students felt that while general course advising was poor, they received good course information during their Student Success course. In addition, students developed relationships with their Student Success course professors. For many students, this relationship extended beyond their time in the Student Success course, facilitating a long-term source of high-quality course advising.

The structure of the Student Success course encouraged interactions between students and professors, and so students felt that their Student Success professors knew them and their goals well. This enabled the Student Success professors to give students individualized course advice, which was greatly appreciated. Because students built trusting relationships with these professors, they often sought them out after the course ended, opting to meet with their Student Success professor rather than a college advisor when selecting courses for future semesters. Earlier, we introduced student NF26, whose experience epitomizes this process. We quoted her as saying that she received information about courses and professors from her Student Success professor. In her second interview, a full year after she took the Student Success course, student NF26 was still meeting with her Student Success professor. The student said of the professor, "She's sort of like my go-to person now" (NF26). In this way, the influence of the course extended well beyond the confines of the course itself. Such a long-term relationship and indepth information source was harder to come by for students who did not take the Student Success course.

Relationships plus integration leads to information

As previously discussed, it appears that the Student Success course facilitated students' relationships with their peers and professors. That seems to have contributed to students' overall integration into the social and academic fabric of the college. These two benefits reinforced each other and enabled students to access important information networks throughout the college. Because they were better integrated, students felt comfortable making contact with even more people, such as classmates, staff, and faculty, which increased the amount of information they were able to access.

Social theorists have suggested that social relationships create a network whereby information can be acquired (Coleman, 1988). For example, students who form social relationships with peers benefit because those relationships grant access to information. Through their relationships with classmates, the students have access to information that can help them in college, including information on which are the best professors, what classes are required for their major, or which offices to visit for the resources they need. Students in our sample often referenced their peers as a valuable source of information. One student (EF16) explained how she chose a course based on a conversation with a friend in class. She felt that her friend's suggestion helped her choose an elective that complemented her nursing major.

Students in our sample also mentioned non-academic-related information that they received from their peers. For example, one Eastern student described how a friend from psychology class who worked at the college's career office connected her to a staff member at that office who subsequently helped her find an on-campus job. As with the course advising discussed above, these benefits lasted beyond the period of the course and influenced students throughout their time in college. Such enduring benefits are unlikely to accrue from services that are not presented in the form of a long-term course that encourages the development of relationships over time.

Areas for Improvement

As we have shown, the Student Success course appears to have provided many benefits to students, and the students generally had quite positive feelings about their experiences in the course. We identified, however, some drawbacks and areas for improvement.

First, although the Student Success course was an important source of information for students, the timing of when students enrolled in the course and the scheduling of key activities within the course influenced the usefulness of this information. Almost every student in our sample who took the Student Success course found it useful. Those few students who found the course less helpful took the course during their second semester rather than their first. Their reaction to the course, then, is not surprising, as it is designed in large measure to acquaint students with the college. Explained one student,

It probably would have been more meaningful if I took it in the fall because he discusses a few things you might need when you're first coming to college, like how to pick your major and make sure you have one, and where certain things in the buildings are. (HF2)

Because campus policies occasionally permitted students to enroll after their first semester, this is an important finding that has implications for policy and practice.

Similarly, the scheduling of activities within the course was sometimes reported to be unhelpful by students because it meant that information was disseminated after the point when it would have been most useful. For example, a few students were frustrated because the campus tours occurred too late in the semester. One Northern student emphasized this by saying,

You don't really know where anything is.... I didn't really know how to get in touch with faculty and where their offices were and everything, because they don't really show you that until two weeks before the semester ends. So if they [the Student Success professor] did that in the beginning it would have been a lot more helpful. (NF21)

Finally, although students generally learned about the resources available at the college in the Student Success course, that did not always ensure that they actually made use of those resources. In analyzing the data, we found this theme expressed particularly with regard to students' use of the transfer center, an institutional service that was discussed in the Student Success course. Though students invariably mentioned that they learned about this service through the Student Success course, few ever visited the center.

Prior research (Grubb, 2001) has shown that it is important for students to begin planning their career and educational trajectories, including transfer plans, early in their community college careers, and many students in our sample acknowledged that the transfer resource center was important to use when planning to transfer to a four-year school. Yet, even in their third

semester at the college when many students were close to graduating, few students visited the transfer resource center or had started to solidify their plans to transfer. For example, one student, who was in his third semester and planned to transfer to a four-year college the following semester, still did not feel it was necessary to visit the transfer center. "No, I'm not transferring yet so I have not gone.... I think it's basically for the students who are transferring out" (HM30).

It is unclear why students did not make use of the transfer center despite its being discussed in the Student Success course and despite the course's influence in encouraging the use of other support services. One possibility is that students did not feel a sense of urgency surrounding transfer: though low grades motivated them to use other support services, transfer may have seemed too far in the future for them to act upon it. Whatever the reason, it is important to recognize that, as powerful as it may be, a Student Success course does not necessarily encourage the use of services equally. Future research should seek to disentangle why this is the case.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper examined Student Success courses at two community colleges. We used indepth interview data from students enrolled in the courses as well as their peers who did not take the courses to examine students' experiences and student learning. Respondents who took a Student Success course generally felt positive about their experience and reported learning a variety of useful skills and receiving important college-related information. Although their peers who did not take the course often received similar information elsewhere, they had more difficulty doing so. Analysis of the interview data suggests that Student Success courses are an efficient and effective way of providing such information to students.

Students in the study reported that the Student Success course was key in helping them obtain information about the college and courses, learn study skills, and develop meaningful relationships that led to overall integration into the college community. The course also had unintended benefits, as well, in that the sum of the components of the course led to outcomes that the individual pieces could not have created on their own. Students reported not only knowing about, but actually *using* college services as a result of the Student Success course. They

attributed their willingness to access services such as tutoring to the increased level of comfort they felt on the college campus as a result of the course. Similarly, relationships developed through the Student Success course led to students' having access to long-term information sources and high-quality course advising.

Because the importance of participation in the Student Success course was an emergent finding in our study, we were unable to conduct in-depth analyses disaggregating the relative importance of various course benefits. We were unable to determine, for example, if students benefited most from the academic advising included in the course or from other course activities. In addition, since most of the students in our sample who took the course were enrolled full time, we could not compare them to part-time students who took the course to identify possible differences in the use of services among full- and part-time students. Finally, because the majority of our sample participated in the course, and because the sample for this exploratory study was small, we were unable to analyze whether course participation positively influenced student progress toward a degree. Future research, including random assignment studies, should be undertaken to investigate such questions.

It is clear, however, that the Student Success course was a key component in helping students adjust to each of the two community colleges. The positive ways in which students discussed the course and the frequency with which it was identified as a location for learning about and adjusting to the college — often without probing from the researchers — underscores the primary role the Student Success course played in encouraging positive student outcomes. While future research is necessary to more clearly link course participation to student outcomes, the findings presented here support the contention that Student Success courses can help students meet their academic goals.

There are a few caveats to these positive findings, however. The first is that the timing of enrollment in the course appears to be central to its effectiveness. Not surprisingly, students in our study who took the Student Success course in their second, rather than their first, semester had less positive feelings about it and reported gaining less from it. In addition, some components of the course, including important orientation activities, would likely have been more useful to students if they were scheduled earlier in the semester. We recommend that colleges offering such courses keep these two points in mind.

We also recommend that colleges consider making the Student Success course a requirement for all degree-seeking students. At one of the colleges in our study, it was only required of first-time, full-time students. Yet part-time students, who have fewer opportunities to make social connections and to access support services through other avenues, are the very students who could benefit most from the course.

Finally, given the frequency with which Student Success course professors become informal advisors to students as well as the quality of advising that this arrangement seems to provide, we suggest formalizing this relationship. Student Success professors could be named official advisors for their students. This would give students a clear source of advising after completion of the Student Success course, access to an advisor who knows them and their goals, and an advising relationship that is comfortable and familiar. We would expect students to make better use of advising and receive higher-quality advice if the relationship were to be formalized in this way.

Students Success courses have the potential to help students meet their educational goals. Students learn valuable information in such courses, they become more acclimated to college life, and they build important relationships that may be beneficial in helping students progress toward a degree. As community colleges seek ways to improve rates of degree attainment, Student Success courses appear to offer an important strategy for achieving this goal.

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