



the Research & Planning Group  
for California Community Colleges

# Hewlett Leaders in Student Success

## Program Overview and Key Findings

In 2008 and 2009, the RP Group worked closely with the Hewlett Foundation to focus attention on excellent work in basic skills education at California's community colleges. Hewlett Leaders in Student Success highlighted innovations by front-runners in California in order to help accelerate the efforts of all community colleges. Over the two years, the program named seven "Hewlett Leaders," exemplary colleges that demonstrated measurable improvements in success rates among under-prepared students. The program also provided funding to help Hewlett Leaders disseminate their work to other schools. This document summarizes how the colleges were selected and describes some specific, noteworthy practices.

## What we Learned from Hewlett Leaders in Student Success

At the day-long meetings to identify which colleges would be recognized as Hewlett Leaders, selection committee members swapped anecdotes about what they had seen during their visits to two dozen schools with promising student success data. All had demonstrated strength in basic skills education, but had any of them created a pervasive campus-wide support system, rather than a series of stand-alone interventions? If so, how did they get there? Again and again the group talked about tipping points – the moment fine work done in one area took off and inspired similar innovation all across the campus. Nearly every faculty and staff member interviewed could describe such a moment. Many said it was a hard look at data on the small percentage of students who completed the basic skills sequence and were successful in transfer-level courses. On some campuses, it was a change in leadership approach. Others said exciting results in one program or department were recognized and then a decision was made to scale it up.

"Real success comes from deep *and* broad strategies, as well as reflection by an academic community that focuses on students rather than power struggles, using evidence rather than anecdotes, and making tough choices together, knowing that not everyone's good idea will be used. Collaborative leadership and persistence over time is essential—rather than jumping into the program de jour or being sidelined by episodic shifts in funding. And yes, it requires risk and bravery."

Linda Umbdenstock,  
Hewlett Leaders Executive Director

The way Columbia College faculty and staff told the story of their tipping point particularly seized the attention of the committee and provided a framework for understanding how colleges can foster improvement for students in basic skills. It goes like this: For a number of years a few faculty and student services staff had been meeting to hash over the impact poor foundational skills had on student achievement. They called themselves Academic Wellness Educators, or AWE. They had seen how the challenge extended far beyond pre-collegiate math and English classes—few areas of

the college were unaffected. AWE members understood that they needed an all-encompassing approach, and they began planning. Their timing was good. A new president arrived and right away she met with staff and faculty at every level to ask, “What are your concerns? What’s working – what’s not?”

When she got around to AWE, they had quite a list. And when she asked what they needed, they had answers. One request was to get time and a modest amount of money to go see promising programs on other campuses. So off they went in a van, to observe how other colleges were tackling similar problems, and to ask questions. On the long stretches of highway between visits, they talked. A lot. And when they got home, their president gave them room to act. They were on fire, and the AWE agenda took off, involving more and more people until it became integrated into the core of the institution. Within a few years, the results began to show in student success data.

The Columbia College road trip story is instructive because it embodies four elements at the heart of fostering student success:

- A motivated group was empowered to exercise leadership at multiple levels and was supported administratively.
- Rather than looking narrowly at the problem, faculty, administrators, and staff worked together to identify and dismantle barriers to student achievement.
- They gathered information about promising practices in other colleges and set aside time and resources for reflective discussions and planning.
- The enthusiasm of individuals within the college attracted support from more people on campus.

Implicit in this story is a persuasive case for a student-centered approach to reform in community colleges. Hewlett Leaders did not simply demonstrate improvement for students in basic skills. ***By addressing basic skills issues as central to student success, these colleges were able to increase success for all.***

## The Motivation behind the Program

More than 70 percent of students entering California’s community colleges lack core skills in math and English. Every college is aware of these deficiencies, and many have worthwhile programs in place to help underserved students. But few have addressed the challenge with time and money proportionate to student need. And very few have aligned their efforts with the conviction that basic skills success is integral to success at all levels of their college.

Basic skills are sometimes thought of as incidental to the broad mission of California’s system of higher education, however they provide the foundation for intellectual and professional success. Moreover, they are essential to the state’s economic health. The Public Policy Institute of California stresses the urgent need for a more educated state. They project that by 2025 a significant shortfall in educational achievement will cap the state’s potential for economic growth. They estimate that 34 percent of workers in the state will have college degrees, but the need is closer to 41 percent of workers. Citing a national need for engaged citizenry, economic stability, and growth, President Obama has called for five million more degrees by 2020.

## Selecting the Hewlett Leaders

The Hewlett Leaders team began their search for promising models with a data analysis. There is no “typical” profile of a community college in California. So to produce a study with concrete relevance to the state’s diverse student populations and communities, the system’s 110 colleges were divided into four clusters, based on 21 factors.

Data for the two-year study came from the California Community College Chancellor’s Office data system. Each year, the Hewlett Leaders team reviewed data for three successive cohorts of students starting in basic skills classes. First-time, non-transfer level credit English and, separately, math students were followed for three complete years (typically nine semesters). In addition, the team measured the change in cohort success from year to year. The level of success was fairly consistent over time for most colleges. Students who receive associates degrees, certificates, or job-ready skills without passing transfer-level English and math may have met their individual goals, however, this program set a more specific benchmark for success. Our gold standard was the percentage of students starting in basic skills who were successful in transfer-level English or math.

In 2008, the program's first year, the 27 colleges with the strongest data were screened by asking them to give three examples of strategies they use to increase student success in basic skills. In the second year, we reviewed the Basic Skills Plans of the finalists. The visiting team—Elaine Baker, Wade Ellis, Jr., Janet Martinez-Bernal, PhD, Susan Obler, PhD, and Julie Slark—traveled to about a dozen finalists each year, observing classrooms and labs, and interviewing faculty and staff. The team members, who worked in rotating pairs, have exceptional experience as professors, program leaders, administrators, evaluators and researchers.

Their in-depth validation of the data was based on criteria set by some of the most respected minds in the field. The program’s guiding purpose was to discover if there were discernable differences in how these colleges were approaching basic skills. The criteria, set by Rose Asera, PhD, Estela Mara Bensimon, EdD, K. Patricia Cross, PhD, E. Jan Kehoe, PhD, and Vincent Tinto, PhD, provided the framework for our examination of documents, team visits, interviews, and decisions.

Over the two years of the program, Hewlett Leaders in Student Success honored seven colleges. In 2008 these were De Anza College, Columbia College, Santa Barbara City College, and Southwestern College. In 2009, Chaffey College, College of the Canyons, and Mendocino College were selected.

### *Selection Criteria*

The colleges demonstrate promising and innovative approaches to success in basic skills. Their purposeful efforts yield coherent, structured, and systematic activities with investment in assessment and actual improvement in basic skills.

- Curriculum integrated, aligned and organized for effectiveness
- Learner centered classroom practices, e.g. pedagogy and assessment
- Integration of academic support and student services
- Equity, valued and pursued by assessing learning and progress rates by cohort
- Institutional leadership and support, reflected in leadership that is distributed throughout the college, and by planning, professional development, investment, and use of data for improvement

## Translating Principles into Action

The visiting team found sound evidence that colleges can make measureable changes in student success through intentional, consistent, and strategic work. Three overarching principles were found to make a difference:

- Courageous, shared leadership, and coordinated responsibility
- Fearless engagement with data and reflective practice
- Structured, integrated strategies

Each of the Hewlett Leaders displayed unique manifestations of these three principles, suited to local needs. Below are a few of examples of the ways these values are put into action.

### *Courageous, Shared Leadership*

The Hewlett Leaders team used the term “courageous” because the best models they observed were not an earnest series of add-on programs, but a fundamental reorientation of basic skills education. This cannot be done without a bold willingness to allocate resources – time and effort, as well as money – in a persistent way. Leadership can provide the broad context within which decisions are made: What are the key issues? Why do we care enough to focus on them? What decisions must we make? Mission, planning, evaluation, and investment are critical, but the extent to which they actually engage the larger community is a real predictor of success.

The Hewlett Leaders team found that the single most significant factor in a strong college-wide approach to basic skills was distributed leadership, with faculty, staff, and administrative support being requisite to success. Innovations are impossible without academic leadership, but they don’t go far without strong administrative support. That was the case at Columbia College, where changes designed by a small group of faculty and student services staff didn’t take hold until they were backed by a new president. Likewise, in response to a charge from the Santa Barbara City College Board and President, the Vice-President of Instruction and Academic Senate leadership guided discussion and set out a plan, resulting in faculty testing the pedagogical merits of new practices and developing strategies for implementation campus-wide.

When surrounded by people like themselves, in an atmosphere with high expectations and a belief in success, they have a great attitude.

*Herminio Hernando, Program Coordinator,  
Math Performance Success, De Anza College*

Often a considerable gulf separates classroom practice and the best intentions of college innovators. Courageous leadership requires a hard look at, for instance, the organization and delivery of basic skills classes and support. Are the most needy students getting the most experienced instructors? Pre-collegiate courses are most often taught by adjuncts who, although talented individually, cannot easily be

brought into the loop of systematic change. This is particularly true when colleges try structural changes, such as trying to integrate academic departments, learning support strategies, and student services.

An important element in this distributed leadership model, the Hewlett Leaders team recognized, is that participants in change must feel that their efforts are appreciated and recognized. Campus innovators can be burnt out by discouraging rates of drop-out and failure. It makes a difference to many practitioners to be surrounded by a culture of confidence that basic skills efforts are about *improvement*, not damage control.

### *College Examples*

**Santa Barbara City College.** Underlying the college’s success is a leadership approach that both unleashes and guides change. The result is a model of change in which leaders set direction and general guidelines, then empower small groups of specialists from faculty and student services to implement and evaluate new strategies. Gateway, a program through which academic support pervades classes that extend far beyond the pre-collegiate level, is the most visible achievement of the college’s distribution of leadership between multiple levels.

**Chaffey College.** A defining feature of this college is the broad buy-in of faculty, staff, and administrators to the college’s system of Student Success Centers, used by half of all students every semester. Framed not as interventions for struggling students, the Centers function as partners to classroom learning. This depends upon strong collaboration, for example by instructors working with Success Center staff to design extensive directed learning activities. The college administration has changed since 2000, when the Centers opened, but institutional support remains strong. Courageous leadership is not limited to one visionary moment of big-bang change. It is required as a matter of course in on-going, tough decisions that sustain innovation over the long term.

**College of the Canyons.** In a climate of high expectations set by their Chancellor, who has led the college since 1988, faculty and staff are encouraged and recognized for risk taking and innovation. This is illustrated in part by the value the college places on professional development, which is extended to adjuncts. Faculty offices are arranged not by department, but in clusters that represent a number of different disciplines. So no instructor can say, “Mathematics? I don’t know them – I never get to that side of campus.” Instructors say this strengthens collaboration on new projects.

### *Fearless engagement with data and reflective practice*

The demands of mandated reports can overshadow other responsibilities of institutional researchers. They drive priorities toward external, administrative, and quantitative reporting, while internal assessment of student learning can be nonexistent or sporadic. Even useful data that exist are often not transformed into information usable for planning. For most colleges, enlisting data in the pursuit of equity would require a major restructuring of the role of institutional research.

The strongest of the Hewlett Leaders demonstrated the availability and use of disaggregated data to understand outcomes and the relative success of different populations. They were also committed to tracking what happened as a result of new practices, not just making one-time comparisons of one small group to the larger student body.

I would argue that fearlessly assessing student learning with the purpose of improving conditions for its success is essential in achieving equity.

*Janet Martinez-Bernal, PhD., Hewlett Leaders in Student Success visiting team*

Setting aside time for reflection on the meaning of the data was crucial. It is this practice that translates numbers from abstractions into information that can be put to use at classroom, program, and institutional levels. The Hewlett Leaders team saw fearlessness in the practice of using data as one of the touchstones for experimentation, with faculty and staff assisting in research designs that gathered meaningful information about both existing structures and new ideas. As team member Janet Bernal-Martinez notes, this kind of collaboration between faculty, student services staff, and researchers can be energizing. “Instructors focusing on course content, academic prerogatives, and student performance are often unaware of how helpful, even enlightening and invigorating, research on student learning can be.”

Fearlessness also describes a willingness to try new things with no guarantee of success and the courage to be honest about the results. The Hewlett Leaders team noted that these colleges found meaning in those pedagogical innovations that didn’t work, as well as the ones that did. In other words, these colleges recognized that improvement may not look like a steadily rising line on a graph.

### *College Examples*

**DeAnza College.** The institutional researchers at the college use data as a matter of course to track performance and make decisions. Academic and student services planning is informed by data that follow sub-groups of students over time, measuring what interventions are effective. Aggregated data can’t provide insights into what is happening in individual classrooms. Through cohort data, the college can see if innovations in teaching or academic support that appear to work, may in fact be leaving behind particular ethnic or age groups.

**Chaffey College.** The team members who visited Chaffey were struck by the fact that the practice and results of research were present at every table and at every discussion. They took this, in part, as evidence of the extent to which research on student learning was incorporated into professional development. Success data are analyzed for every basic skills class and a large number of transfer-level classes. How much of a difference will attending Success Center workshops make in any particular class? How much will grades and persistence improve if students work on the Directed Learning Activities designed for any given class? At the beginning of every semester, advisors can give students the answer to these questions, influencing the way students make decisions on seeking academic support.

**College of the Canyons.** Recent pilots in math and ESL show a close collaboration between classroom faculty and institutional research – the evidence being a practice of designing assessment into new classroom experiments. In mathematics, for instance, a skeptical instructor set out to measure if a class taught through active learning techniques could match the success of a demographically similar group of students in a traditional, lecture-based format. When the data showed that this intervention made a measurable difference, the instructor expanded the program.

### *Structured, integrated strategies*

In myriad ways and at considerable depth, the seven Hewlett Leaders have endeavored to break down the clichéd silos upon which business-as-usual depends. “This is not working around the edges,” said Hewlett Leaders’ Executive Director Linda Umbdenstock. “This kind of realignment means that no existing organizational structure is immune to re-thinking.”

The Hewlett Leaders team found that a hallmark of success was that the boundaries between student services and academic services were blurred or so thoroughly interwoven that the

distinction is invisible to students. Faculty are in learning centers, counselors are in classrooms, and tutors are in both. Most fundamentally, this work requires colleges to drop assumptions about what students do or don't know and need, and to build in multiple access points to academic and student services support.

They come afraid they will fail. Then after two semesters they say they want an AA – they want to transfer – they want everything! They take this confidence out into the rest of the world.

*Dr. Sandra Corona, Director of the Spanish-to-English Child Development Program, Southwestern College*

Restructuring basic skills education from students' point of view means integration in curriculum content as well, particularly the process and context of learning. Rather than having student services serve as the door to resources such as study skills workshops, faculty and staff can collaborate to infuse coaching on skills such as time management, taking notes, problem-solving, and

interpersonal communication into their courses. Other examples include finding ways in math or automotive tech courses to strengthen writing skills or sending students to the transfer office to research an ESL assignment on career plans.

### *College Examples*

**Southwestern College.** The college has transformed ESL instruction through the integration of vocational and basic skills classes, with built-in support from student services. A certificate sequence in Child Development starts with instruction (and textbooks) in Spanish, transitioning to English in subsequent semesters as students' language skills improve. Visits from student services staff are built into the curriculum, introducing students to college resources that they may not feel comfortable seeking out on their own, like counseling, advising, financial aid, and EOPS, among others. Other departments use variations of this model, building mastery in spoken and written English while students learn technical skills needed for work in medical and legal offices, for instance, or electronics.

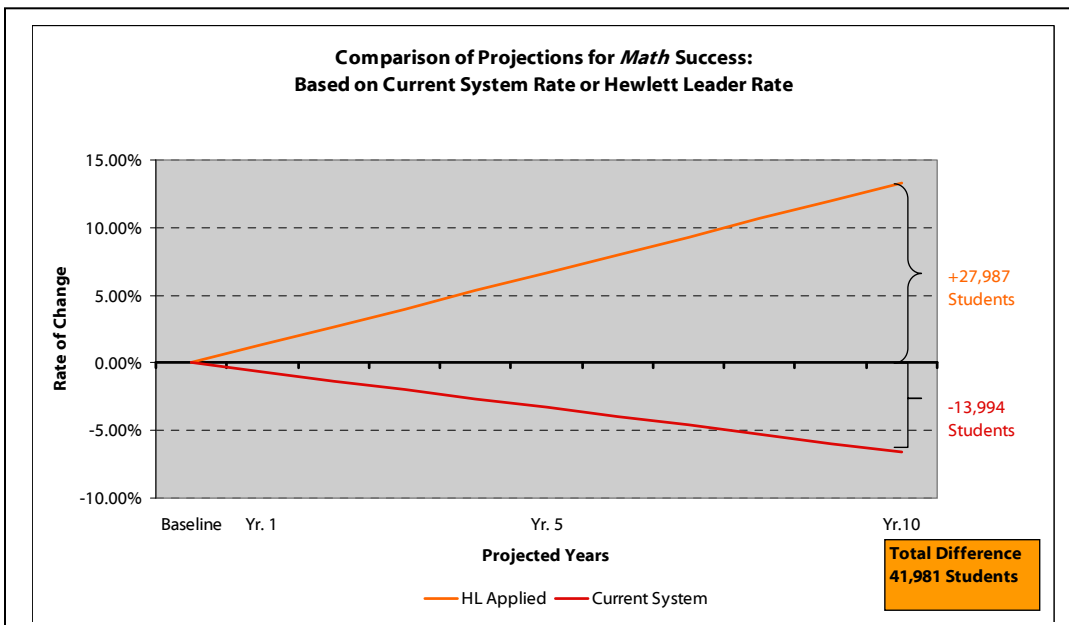
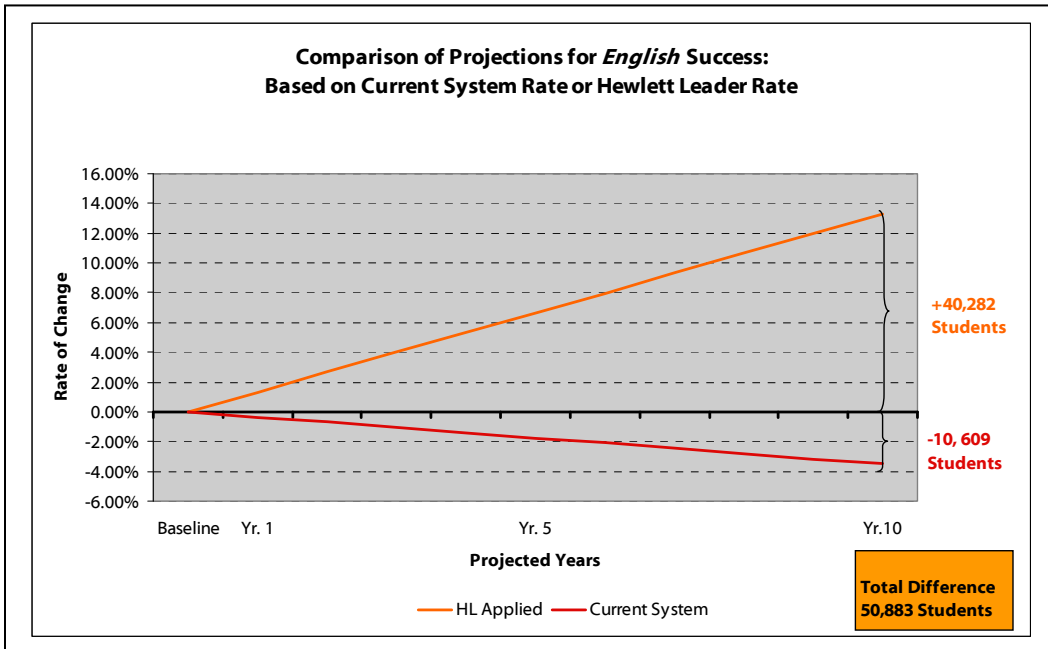
**Chaffey College.** The fundamental organizing force at the college, are its Student Success Centers, rather than individual departments or certificate/degree programs. This structure insures that strategies shown to improve basic skills are not shuttled off to the side as a separate endeavor from "real" college education. Having passed out of basic skills English, after all, doesn't mean a student has no need for workshops on study skills. Half of all students use the Centers every term.

**Mendocino College.** Seeing the long-term success of Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA), the college made a commitment to offer similar support to every student in basic skills math. By leveraging a model that was well understood on campus, the college made a significant impact on achievement in math with a very modest learning curve for faculty and staff. Because nobody at Mendocino needed to be convinced that the MESA model was worth expanding, suspicion or outright opposition was limited.

**Santa Barbara City College.** Gateway-to-Success started as a faculty-driven tutoring system for students in basic skills classes. Its impact on success and retention was so persuasive that the model was soon expanded. The scale-up was coordinated, yet not imposed. The program expanded incrementally in some departments and quickly took hold in others. Not only is faculty participation in Gateway voluntary, the model is flexible enough that instructors have wide leeway on how the faculty-tutor-student triangle works in their own classrooms. This invites experimentation that is then measured and shared.

## Why this Matters

Data from the entire California community college system show a slight but persistent decline in the success of students who start in a basic skills class and progress to transfer-level coursework. If this rate continues over the next ten years, almost 11,000 fewer students in English and 14,000 fewer in math will make it past the starting block of for-credit basic skills coursework to success in transfer-level courses. If the entire system could achieve the success rate shown by Hewlett Leaders, however, tens of thousands more students would succeed.





These figures do not promise a revolution in basic skills, but they represent improvement in the chances for academic and professional success for a significant number of individuals. Furthermore, the impact of the systemic change undertaken by the Hewlett Leaders is likely to extend beyond the figures captured above for two reasons. First, the strategies devised to support basic skills students appear to increase the success of *all* students, regardless of skill level. Second, on campus after campus, the Hewlett Leaders team heard faculty, staff, and administrators describe the positive impact their efforts were making in unforeseen areas of their college's operation. More broadly, the team heard statements of extraordinary optimism that large-scale change is possible. The Hewlett Leaders team noted transformational improvements in a number of colleges between the first and second year of the site visits, which gives some insight into the exponential nature of this kind of change.

One key measure of the long-term impact of the integrated, student-centered approach adopted by the Hewlett Leaders will be whether success rates can be maintained during the current budget crisis. Many colleges have approached the need for basic skills support by adding on individual programs as funding opportunities arise. The problem, of course, is that when budgets are reduced, stand-alone programs are particularly vulnerable to being cut or eliminated. Because the Hewlett Leaders undertook structural changes, many of which happened independent of outside funding, the team believes that they will have a better chance of maintaining their momentum.

## Find out More

It is the founding assumption of the Hewlett Leaders in Student Success program that every community college will benefit from understanding innovative examples of success in basic skills education. No summary of Hewlett Leaders' strategies can do justice to their on-the-ground work. That's why each college received a \$15,000 grant to support the dissemination of their ideas and methods. The Hewlett Leaders are rising to this challenge through conference presentations, workshops, publications, webinars, and by hosting visitors. Please visit the Hewlett Leaders website to access specific information about the colleges, video overviews of the 2009 Hewlett Leaders, excerpts of comments by college representatives during a colloquium on basic skills, and streaming presentations about practices at specific Hewlett Leaders colleges. We invite all who care about community college education to study these models and to reflect upon how their own colleges can translate into action the foundation principles of courageous leadership, fearless engagement with data, and structured, integrated strategies.

Margaret Miller wrote this summary in collaboration with Hewlett Leaders Executive Director Linda Umbdenstock, the Hewlett Leaders visiting team, and RP Group Executive Director Kathy Booth. For more information and resources produced by the Hewlett Leaders in Student Success, visit <http://hewlettleadersinstudentsuccess.org/>.