

ACADEMY FOR COLLEGE EXCELLENCE: SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LONG-TERM STUDENTS OUTCOMES

A Mixed-Methods Study

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Project Overview

In 2015, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) was contracted by the Joyce/Cabrillo Foundation to assess the long-term impact of the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) on students who had participated in the program between fall 2003 and spring 2014 at three California Community Colleges: Berkeley City, Cabrillo, and Hartnell Colleges.

To accomplish this goal, the RP Group designed and implemented a mixed-methods research study, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze the effect of participating in ACE in both students' personal and professional lives.

Introduction

This brief summarizes the key **qualitative and quantitative research findings** highlighting the ways in which the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) helped build the capacity of individuals facing numerous obstacles to success to thrive as students, participants in the workforce, and members of the community.¹

The main goal of ACE is **to prepare students to navigate and succeed in college, work, and life**. In particular, ACE is designed to help individuals who have historically faced a wide range of challenges to academic and career success—such as underrepresented groups, foster youth, veterans, and more—achieve their educational and employment goals. The program is **designed to foster intrinsic engagement and motivation** among community college students, providing support through

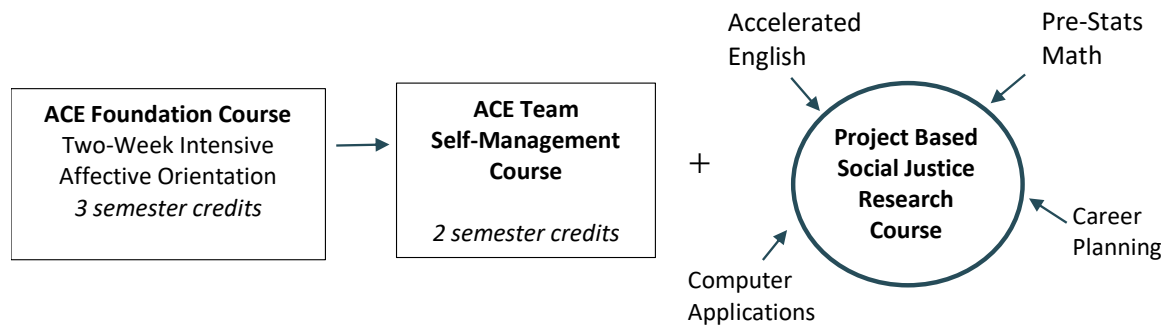
curriculum and instruction that holistically addresses students' needs (Navarro, 2017; Navarro & Hayward, 2014).

ACE offers a flexible model that can be **scaled, sustained, and replicated to serve different types of learners**, such as basic skills students, career/technical education (CTE) students, as well as college-ready students. Many colleges have adapted the ACE model to meet the particular needs of their student populations as well as align with the resources available at the institution. Figure 1 below on the following page illustrates the components of the fully implemented ACE model. An individual college's ACE program may contain some or all of these components, with the exception of the mandatory Foundations of Leadership Course. Prior to beginning their academic coursework, all ACE students complete this intensive two-week college-level course, which prepares students for academic engagement and professional careers by focusing on the development of professional skills targeting affective mindsets and behaviors associated with student success in both career and school (Asera & Navarro, 2013).

¹ ACE has been the subject of several longitudinal research studies: <http://academyforcollegeexcellence.org/reports-on-ace/>



Figure 1. The ACE Model



Source: Karandeff and Cooper (2013)

Evaluation Methodology

Qualitative data for this evaluation was collected via telephone surveys with 435 individuals who had completed ACE at some point between 2003 and 2014 at one of three colleges that host the ACE program: Cabrillo College, Berkeley City College, and Hartnell College. The telephone survey was a 30-question instrument designed to capture former students’ impressions of the ACE program, with an emphasis on how specific program components may have impacted students’ academic, career, and personal outcomes. In particular, the survey explored how the ACE personal success skills (see Table 1) have affected participants’ employability, competitiveness in the workplace, emotional well-being, community ties, and capacity to develop and realize academic and professional goals.

Table 1. ACE Personal Success Skills

Personal Success Skill	Examples
1. Purpose and direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realizing one’s own influence over life and personal success Considering the consequences of one’s actions
2. Self-awareness and self-discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding bioreactions, such as fight, flight, freeze, or appease
3. Communicating with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying, grasping, and aligning needs/concerns of individuals with the goals of a project team or organization practiced by leaders
4. Working styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding one’s own and others’ working styles
5. Social justice research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivating critical thinking through the use of research methods

Quantitative research complemented the telephone survey with an in-depth analysis of ACE participants’ educational and employment outcomes and comparison of those outcomes to a demographically similar group of students who did not enroll in ACE. Looking at just under 3,000 former ACE students from Cabrillo, Berkeley City, and Hartnell Colleges, the researchers compared key academic outcomes to a similar group of non-ACE participants as well as whether median annual wage differences existed over time between ACE and non-ACE

participants. Student-level information from each college as well as data from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Management Information System (MIS) and the U.S. Employment Development Department (EDD) was gathered to answer these research questions.

Key Findings

This section highlights some of the key findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research conducted.

A Population Under Significant Strain

As alluded to earlier, ACE students typically face a wide range of barriers to success in educational settings. An examination of a subset of the students tracked for this evaluation revealed almost 20 risk factors—such as child abuse, mental health condition, medical condition, unstable housing, history of being in foster care, currently or previously on probation, homeless, and gang association—in these students' lives, and the **majority of students were juggling multiple risk factors** at one time (Farr, Rotermund, Radwin, Robles, and Choy, 2014).

These substantial obstacles to success must be taken into consideration when assessing ACE participants' academic and earnings outcomes in comparison to their demographically similar peers. In many cases, **simply keeping pace with other community college students who are not facing such an onslaught of barriers is a powerful achievement in and of itself.**

ACE Participants' Academic and Earnings Outcomes

Academic Achievements

To assess the academic progress of former ACE participants, the RP Group looked at certain key academic milestones, including successful completion of transfer-level math and English courses, nursing and pre-nursing coursework, achievement of 30 transfer-level units, completion of a certificate or degree, and transfer to a four-year institution. Analysis of ACE participants' achievement of these milestones in comparison to a matched group of similar students revealed the following:

ACE Student Characteristics*

GENDER.

- ✓ 56% male
- ✓ 44% female

ETHNICITY.

- ✓ 63% Hispanic
- ✓ 19% White
- ✓ 7% African-American
- ✓ 11% Other / Unknown

RISK FACTORS. Nearly one-fourth (26%) faced multiple risk factors, most commonly:

- ✓ Government assistance (40%)
- ✓ English as a second language (39%)
- ✓ Unstable home (38%)
- ✓ Previous probation (28%)
- ✓ Jail (2%)
- ✓ Gang association (25%)

**Demographic data reflect community college records and self-reporting from over 2,500 non-CTE ACE students examined during the program evaluation.*

- ✓ The **greatest positive academic outcomes were found among students who completed all the courses in the ACE program that include accelerated English**, especially in those programs that were most compliant with the full ACE model. Most times, these students were at least **twice as likely as students in the control group** to earn an award, complete a transfer-level English or math course, and earn 30 units within three years of enrolling in ACE.
- ✓ A **greater percentage of ACE nursing students graduated within 3 and 6 years than their pre-nursing peers.**
- ✓ Looking at all academic outcomes over a six-year period, the researchers found **no statistically significant differences between ACE students and their peers** in the control group (with the exception of completion of a transfer-level English and transfer to a four-year institution). *Please note: this result does not include students who participated in ACE as part of a CTE nursing program, which incorporated ACE into its existing cohort-based model.*
- ✓ **Underrepresented minorities** who participated in ACE students completed degrees/certificates and transferred to four-year institutions **at similar rates** to their matched peers.

While these findings may initially seem modest, given the substantial array of risk factors faced by ACE students, it is **remarkable that over the long-term, their academic achievements equaled or came close to matching those of other students who began the academic “race” much closer to the finish line.**

Earnings Outcomes

Data from EDD was used to track the wages of ACE participants and the control group of students over time. Key findings from this analysis include the following:

- ✓ Even though the annual mean wages for the control group were higher overall and over time, **ACE participants had a much higher wage gain (159% to 664%) over time** than students in the control group (107%).
- ✓ Both males of color and underrepresented minority students in general who participated in ACE started to catch up to the control group’s earnings levels by the sixth year. In fact, **underrepresented minority ACE students eventually exceeded the annual median wages of the control group** by almost \$1,000.
- ✓ **ACE nursing students earned significantly higher wages** over time compared to their matched control group. The wage differences over time between ACE nursing students and their matched peers was greater than it was for non-ACE nursing students and their peers.

As with ACE students' academic outcomes, these earnings outcomes may at first seem unremarkable. However, when examined in the context of all of the challenges faced by ACE participants, simply being able to match their more-advantaged peers in terms of earnings is a significant accomplishment. Moreover, the fact that some **ACE participants achieved wages that exceeded those of their peers is a powerful endorsement of the ACE program.**

Impact of Developing Personal Success Skills

As described earlier, the telephone survey asked over 400 former ACE participants how the personal success skills they developed during the ACE program affected their lives going forward. An analysis of survey results revealed the following:

- ✓ The development of **purpose and direction had the most positive influence** on students' lives, particularly in the area of work.
- ✓ Learning self-awareness and self-discipline enabled ACE students to **pause and regain perspective** in both job-related and personal interactions.
- ✓ The cultivation of collaborative leadership and communication skills empowered ACE participants to **break down communication barriers** in personal and professional situations.
- ✓ Understanding their own and others' working styles proved critical to successful job performance and personal relationships.
- ✓ Most respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that personal success skills had a positive influence on their work (75%) and personal lives (92%).

Finally, the vast majority of respondents indicated that **ACE had positively impacted their work and personal lives** (90% and 86%, respectively).

Conclusion

The findings drawn from this comprehensive quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the impact of the ACE program strongly suggest that **ACE has a positive effect on students' academic, career, and personal success.** The extensive telephone interviews conducted indicate that ACE supports students' academic and social integration in higher education and delivers psycho-social supports for underserved and underrepresented college students. Moreover, participant feedback suggests that ACE inspires the pursuit of additional education,

For More Information...

For more information on the RP Group's longitudinal mixed-methods study of the Academy for College Excellence, visit <http://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/152> or contact the project directors, Rogéair Purnell-Mack (rpurnell@rpgroup.org) and Alyssa Nguyen (anguyen@rpgroup.org).

For more information on the Academy for College Excellence, visit <http://academyforcollegeexcellence.org/>.

teaches students to work effectively in a team, and overall positively influences students' work and personal lives.

Furthermore, **for historically underrepresented, first-generation, and “at-risk” students, ACE promotes postsecondary education as a tool for personal and economic success** and facilitates participants' effective navigation of and success in the college/professional environment. Finally, findings indicate that **participation in ACE builds students' ability to complete transfer-level coursework, achieve educational awards, and increase earnings over time.**

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