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The Four Cs of Promising Practices in Community Colleges

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To address the achievement or opportunity gap of underrepresented populations in community colleges, this qualitative field methods study investigated five California community college programs that have demonstrated progress in improving (or show significant potential to improve) student achievement. This research found that promising practices have several conceptual conditions in common—cohesion, connection, cooperation, and consistency—referred to as the *Four Cs*. Although many of the key components that contribute to the development of promising practices in community college programs are unique to their specific contexts, the presence of these more general Four Cs may be transferable to other community college sites because they can be cultivated in different contexts while respecting the idiosyncrasies of particular community colleges.

The lamentations over community colleges' performance and student outcomes are legion. They go back to the 1960s (Meier, 2013) and continue into the present (Pusser & Levin, 2009). There has been a plethora of research identifying best practices for community colleges; discipline-specific journals are full of them, as are publications such as *New Directions for Community Colleges* that are written for community college scholars and practitioners. But, those efforts often have limited effects on actual educational practices—on the specific organization of the educational experiences of students as they interact with community college personnel—both because they fail to recognize the unique contexts and individuals present in specific community college settings and they eschew theory (Levin & Kater, 2013). Sashkin and Ergermeier (1993) suggest that the more research presents ''stand-alone information, the less likely it is that potential users will actually adopt [its prescribed] innovations'' (p. 8). Given the community college's special characteristics as an institution, including its student population, comprehensive curriculum, employment status of faculty, and multiple missions (Levin & Kater, 2013), the challenge of identifying practices that are not only exemplary but also potentially transferable is considerable.

One of the major problems that faces community colleges is referred to as the achievement or opportunity gap between a majority White population and an underrepresented minority population (Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagon, & Solorzano, 2006). That is, a population of low-income, Latino, Native American, African American, and undocumented students continues to lag behind their White, Asian, and more affluent peers in entering, persisting, and completing

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community college programs (Dougherty & Keinzl, 2006; Horn & Neville, 2006; Leinbach & Bailey, 2006). To address this problem, this study identified and explored examples of California community college programs that have demonstrated progress in closing (or show significant potential to improve) the achievement or opportunity gap. The aim was not only to identify promising practices that lead to student achievement for all students but also to suggest the conceptual conditions that may be transferred to other community college campuses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Central to this study is the concept of educational practice. Based on Rockwell's (1995) description of the construction of school scenarios, the authors understand an educational practice in a community college setting to be a specific organization of the educational experiences of individual students and college employees (such as faculty, administrators, and staff). An educational practice has several dimensions including its structure, content, the conditions of teaching and learning, and the transmission of value orientations that enable individuals to develop a perspective about themselves and their context. To understand the production of educational practices, the authors draw upon three theoretical approaches: an educational ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989); an organizational model (Bidwell, 1965, 2001; Scott, 1998); and a historical–cultural perspective of how educational experiences are constructed (Rockwell, 1999).

An educational ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) emphasizes the importance of the relationships between community colleges and their environments to educational practices. This model focuses this study's analysis on two aspects of community college practice. First are the ways in which programs interact with other colleges, universities, business communities, and federal or state agencies. Second are the ways that community college programs and their practices are influenced by their surrounding contexts (for example, state budget constraints and local demographics).

An organizational model of educational practice (Bidwell, 1965, 2001; Scott, 1998) calls attention to the view that educational practices are the result of constitutive action within formal organizations. This orientation serves as a reminder that community college practices are developed by organizational members whose actions are framed by the intersection of social structures, goals, technology, and the environment, which both constrain and enable individual behaviors. Thus, to develop a specific program or practice, community college personnel must identify and integrate organizational resources, structures, and processes in order to accomplish shared goals.

Finally, the historical–cultural perspective (Rockwell, 1999) helps to gain an understanding of the historical, cultural, and subjective factors that influence educational practice. Drawing from this perspective, the authors focused on the ways in which the patterns of continuity and change within local and larger traditions contributed to the development of specific educational practices. As part of this analysis, the authors explored how and why community college personnel abandon, preserve, or create new organizational behaviors to adjust to the dynamic contexts of their community college programs over time.

Taken together, these educational ecology, organizational, and historical–cultural perspectives help develop an understanding of community college practices that are (a) constructed within and, therefore, both constrained and enabled by specific historical traditions; (b) mediated by local institutional, community, and state contextual factors; (c) based on the negotiation of

official and everyday norms that result from the existence of various ideologies and personal backgrounds; and (d) reinvented continually by individuals in order to navigate contextual demands.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PROMISING PRACTICES

There exist numerous definitions of a best practice, both in the education and business literature. Dehoff et al. (2001), for example, define a best practice as a ''rigorous, and highly analytical process'' that involves ''identifying superior capabilities,'' transferring them to new situations, and ''systematically monitoring and realizing results'' (p. 2). Although these definitions of best practices have their utility, the authors have chosen to stay away from the term best practice, preferring instead *promising practice* to avoid the implication that any one is the best. Thus, based on the theoretical approaches (Bidwell, 1965, 2001; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Rockwell, 1999; Scott, 1998), the authors define a promising practice as a social structure that is context-driven and responsive to its environment, that possesses and capitalizes on its unique historical and cultural conditions, and that allows for the achievement of goals that ensure both the development of the participants and the consolidation of the organization itself. A promising practice in the context of a community college should lead to student-learning gains and demon-strated success in closing the achievement gap, as measured by course pass rates, certificate or degree attainment rates, and to the consolidation of organizational strategies that are responsive to the characteristics and demands of the student body. In the authors' view, organizational strategies that are designed and integrated in order to provide comprehensive support to dis-advantaged students are central components of a promising practice.

Scholarship indicates that for practices to be useful in other contexts and sites they must be sufficiently described and detailed if they are to be understood and ultimately transferred successfully (Dehoff et al., 2001; McKeon, 1998). The three dimensions of educational practice emphasized in this study (ecological, historical-cultural, and organizational) help to break down educational practices to identify both the explicit and tacit knowledge underlying a program and to probe for the internal knowledge of modifications made during the implementation and maintenance of a promising practice that do not appear in explicit records.

METHODS

To identify promising programs in California community colleges, the authors used a purposeful sampling method (Maxwell, 2005) that drew upon the expertise and knowledge held by prominent community college practitioners and policymakers in California. Recommendations were solicited from a panel of experts consisting of state-level officials, community college administrators, and other knowledgeable practitioners including faculty. They were asked to identify exemplary community colleges in key instructional areas (including English as a second language, basic skills, transfer programs targeting underrepresented students, and career or vocational programs). Next, the authors evaluated each recommended program based on data collected from a variety of sources including the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the 2007 Chancellor's Office Accountability Reporting for Community Colleges (ARCC), and individual college websites. Instructional programs were compared based on what

the authors termed *effectiveness indicators*: student outcomes such as course pass rates, job placement rates, certificate or degree attainment rates, and progress through instructional sequences. Finally, where possible, the authors used data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status to assess the progress each college program had made in closing the achievement gap.

The authors also collected demographic information about each recommended college including the region of California and its location (e.g., urban or rural); its enrollment (both total and full-time equivalent); and the racial/ethnic, gender, and age composition of its student body and local community. Using this demographic information (as well as an analysis of effectiveness indicators), the authors compiled a sample of six community college instructional programs stratified by region, location, and by enrollment size. The focus on the achievement gap necessitated selecting colleges that have high proportions of Latino, African American, and/or or Native American students.

Although six programs were identified through this process, only five ultimately proved to be carrying out promising practices in their selected program area. Thus, the data reported in this paper draw from those five programs only:

- English as a second language (ESL): City College of San Francisco (CCSF) in northern California (the ''Bay Area'').
- Basic Skills/Developmental Education: Chaffey College, in southern California.
- Transfer (targeting African Americans or Latinos): Santa Monica College in southern California.
- Trade or Certification Program: Los Angeles Trade-Technical College in southern California.
- Vocational: Modesto Junior College (MJC) in central California.

The authors contacted all six community colleges and asked if they would be interested in participating in this study of promising practices. After receiving letters of consent from each institution, the authors finished the institutional review board (IRB) process. In accordance with IRB procedures, they instructed the participating institutions that they would be identified in research reports, but that the reports would not use individual names or exact titles of the participants. Beginning in October 2007 and until May 2008 a team of four-to-seven researchers from the California Community College Collaborative (C4) conducted this field research investigation using in-depth qualitative case study methods and data analyses of promising programs.

The approach followed case study methodology (Merriam, 1998) and relied upon qualitative research design principles and components (Maxwell, 2005). Data collected for this study consisted primarily of one-on-one, semistructured interviews with faculty, administrators, staff, and students involved in the six programs; focus group interviews; participant observation; and document analysis (Mason, 2002). Relevant faculty, students, administrators, and staff were identified through program documents and through the use of a snowball sampling technique (Mason, 2002; Merriam, 1998), which relies upon the personal references of other participants.

The research team conducted approximately 15 interviews with program administrators, faculty, support staff, representatives from external organizations, and students from each site. In addition, one-to-two focus groups were held per site with students (although at two sites, focus groups consisted of faculty or staff groups as well). Interviews lasted for approximately one hour, and almost all took place in a quiet, private setting on campus. Focus groups ran between one and two hours, and all of these also took place in a quiet, private setting on campus.

Interviews and focus group conversations were digitally recorded. The researchers employed member-checking for the purpose of validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The research team collected and reviewed a wide array of documents related to each instructional and support program under investigation such as written program goals and expectations, in-house evaluations, and course syllabi. They viewed these documents as institutional records (Scott, 1990) that would reveal both intentions and behaviors of individual participants, as well as the institutional structures that both enabled and constrained their action. Analysis of these documents was intended to triangulate themes identified in interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, and provide valuable information about the context, processes, and challenges involved in implementing and sustaining such a program.

After fieldwork was completed, the research team members transcribed the interview and focus group data. Data analysis followed the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), particularly with regard to coding of data. Data were coded around our three theoretical dimensions grounded in organizational effectiveness literature. The coding scheme emphasized the following: (a) elements of the ecological relationships of the community college program; (b) elements of the history and culture of the program; and (c) the organizational structure of the program. Data analysis was completed through a process where team members regularly met to discuss the coding process and decipher how specific program characteristics should be coded. These meetings served as a means for team members to collaborate and make sense of how the programs functioned, what practices were common among the programs, which were distinctive, and how these practices were successful in closing the achievement gap.

RESULTS

The practices examined in this study have four conceptual conditions in common that enable their respective programs to adapt to their contexts and to aid in student development and attainment. The authors refer to these conceptual conditions as the Four Cs: cohesion, connection, cooperation, and consistency. The authors hypothesize that these attributes are the key elements of programs that show promise in closing the achievement/opportunity gap. The authors describe the characteristics of our Four Cs through the use of specific examples from the programs studied. This illustrates the variety of ways in which these important conceptual conditions can be created elsewhere.

Cohesion

The first of the Four Cs, cohesion, refers to the ability of community college programs and their personnel to operate as a unit where behaviors and actions mesh or are rationally consistent. More specifically, the programs in this study exhibited cohesion through strong, uniting faculty or student cultures and in tightly organized curriculum and instruction programming.

The exemplary program culture in this study was found in the Success Centers at Chaffey College (Levin, Cox, Haberler, & Cerven, 2011). The Success Centers were the result of a decade long effort to reform basic skills delivery at Chaffey College. Initially, Chaffey College employed a decentralized model of basic skills where different student service programs and departments had their own basic skills programming. However, faculty, administrators,

and support staff perceived that model as failing and collectively undertook an overhaul of the program that resulted in the creation of the centralized Success Centers model which provides service to all Chaffey College students. Beginning with the leadership vision of an administrator at the launch of the reform effort, Chaffey College developed a vast pattern of support for the Success Centers that is evident in the internal financial support of the Success Centers and a campus-wide refusal to use the term *basic skills* (Levin et al., 2011).

With Success Centers initially externally funded from the state's California community college system office, Chaffey College now supports the Success Centers fully. One Instructional Specialist (the title given to faculty responsible for the Success Centers) relayed a story from a committee meeting that illustrates this collective sentiment that sustains the centers to the present day:

> Someone had presented that the Success Centers needed some supplemental funding . . . it went to the committee of about 50 people representative of across campus . . . and I think I was the only Instructional Specialist there, and I didn't even have to say anything . . . So many faculty from all over the place . . . were like ''Yes! We have to support the Success Centers!''

The response of faculty to securing the continuance of the Success Centers was immediate and urgent. A vice-president took on the leadership role and recruited key institutional members who would ensure participation from other institutional faculty and administrators and the development of a cohesive approach. One administrator noted that this vice-president ''was really the person who looked at basic skills as an issue that he thought we needed to take on.'' The vice-president and a college dean spearheaded a task force, which, according to a staff member, enabled a restructuring of basic skills at the college:

> [T]he people who were on the committee were well-connected to the college community . . . We could go out to our respective constituents and plug it . . . What we initially did was make sure that all of us were responsible as individuals at the table to go back to our constituents and gather information.

Consistent with the literature on organizational change, the kind of ''reorientation'' undertaken at Chaffey College required campus administrative and faculty leaders to spend ''time to shape the change, build coalitions, and empower individuals to be effective . . . [while reshaping] core values in service to the revised strategy'' (Nadler & Tushman, 1990, p. 280).

The Success Centers are an example of what occurs when the moral imperative to provide all students with the tools they need to succeed in their coursework surpasses concern for financial issues. Not all of the educational practices at the Success Centers are transferable because of unique context and historical development of Chaffey College. The cultural cohesion at Chaffey developed over time in response to the vision of innovative institutional leadership committed to cultivating the common goal of student progress and through the ongoing commitment of faculty. As such, this particular manifestation of cohesion amongst institutional actors is a conceptual condition that resulted from strong leadership and committed faculty, two components that can be found in other community college programs.

Connection

The second conceptual condition, connection, refers to the program and its personnel's capacity to develop and maintain linkages and relationships both within the institution and to external

parties, so that interdependence is both recognized and relied upon to advance the interests of the program. Because of its emphasis on the environment outside of community college programs, ecological educational practices are the dominant domain for fostering connection.

Situated within Los Angeles' fashion district, the Fashion Program at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College's geographical location is critical as it allows for the continuous integration of program administrators, faculty, and students with industry leadership and production sites. Since the program's inception in 1925, the program and the industry have maintained a strong reciprocal relationship where the Fashion Program meets industry needs by supplying a constant stream of well-trained workers and the industry provides expertise in the form of both curricular guidance and capable faculty.

One primary way the Fashion Program establishes and maintains connections with local industry is through the faculty. The program requires faculty to have a minimum of five years of industry experience to be considered for employment as instructors. One student underlined this point, suggesting that faculty were the key to the success of the program:

> I think they have the correct teachers because they've been in the industry so they know what employers are going to look for, and I think that's what they emphasize on. To give you the right tools so you have the right tools when looking for a job.

These requirements for faculty contribute to the quality of training that the students receive and help ensure that program faculty have up-to-date knowledge and experience with industry trends and technological advances. The association between faculty and industry also ensures that the program connects students to potential employers. According to one Fashion Program administrator, a particular faculty member was instrumental in the development of their internship program:

> What [the internship coordinator] has done—and this is a woman, again, coming out of the industry, being very familiar, knowing people, knowing who's around in the industry, having the contacts and connections . . . she was able to call in connections and actually place students . . . in some kind of a job: answering phones, following someone around.

Here, the relationships between the program and local industry led to the development of connections between students and potential employers. Similarly, the Fashion Program holds an annual fashion show for its students where student entries are judged by a panel of program faculty and staff joined by esteemed industry officials. These practices contribute not only to student employment in local industry but also to recognition of the program in the community. Community partnerships and relationships with both private and public bodies are hallmarks of community colleges (Roueche, Taber, & Roueche, 1995), and colleges and their programs that take advantage of their local community or communities benefit students and student achievement. The Fashion Program's ecologically oriented practices exemplify the importance of connection to career and vocational programs where relationships with local industries are of pivotal importance to program effectiveness (Rosenbaum, 2001). While the Fashion Program benefits from its proximity to the fashion industry of Los Angeles, the presence of strong, reciprocal relationships with organizational bodies within the community is a condition not limited to context. Hiring faculty with local knowledge and experience—whether that knowledge and experience is industrial or cultural in nature—is a practice that any community college can adopt to foster connection between community college programs and their local communities.

Cooperation

Cooperation refers to the degree to which program personnel work together toward common goals and the presence of respectful and supportive relationships between faculty and students as well as between faculty and administrators. Structured interactions, such as curriculum and advisory committees as well as the status of faculty within the programs, cultivate cooperation. One salient example of cooperation regarding curriculum is the ESL department at the City College of San Francisco (CCSF). The department has achieved high integration of curriculum, in spite of having 10 different satellite campuses with somewhat different student populations and offering multiple ESL programs.

The ESL department contains distinct credit and noncredit ESL programs. With six graduated levels of coursework ranging from precollege level reading and writing to critical reading of expository prose and advanced composition, the credit ESL program is designed for students who need academic English skills in order to transition to college work (Spurling, Seymour, & Chisman, 2008). The ESL curriculum, then, is a well-coordinated effort in its own right. The noncredit ESL program is similarly complex. Noncredit ESL classes are offered at several CCSF campuses and at noncampus locations across the city (Spurling et al., 2008). Nine levels of coursework are organized into six categories: Literacy, Bridge, Citizenship, Focus, General, and Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL).

The complexity of the credit and noncredit ESL programs is compounded by the difficulty of offering those curricula at multiple institutional locations, which places a significant burden on the department's faculty to coordinate the programs. One administrator explained that the coordination and planning of all ESL services are handled by faculty Campus Coordinators who assume administrative responsibilities during release time from their teaching load at each of the 10 campuses offering ESL classes. Four Campus Coordinators stated they primarily see themselves as faculty. Here is how one coordinator explained it:

> Campus Coordinators are teachers. We get released from most of [our] teaching to do this job which . . . involves scheduling, troubleshooting, and generally coordinating activities at the campus.

These Campus Coordinators spearhead the department's efforts at collaborating and communicating about matters surrounding the curriculum and operation of the ESL program on all CCSF campus locations.

The ESL department at CCSF illustrates how organizational practices lead to a cooperative environment. Faculty coordinate their efforts to streamline the intricate credit and noncredit ESL programs at CCSF's numerous locations, and their participation in those efforts is correlated with high levels of institutional support as well as high status and involvement in college governance. While the relative strength of the ESL faculty is an important part of faculty performance and student outcomes at CCSF, cooperative behaviors—those that support the effective functioning of ESL curricula—are reproducible at other community college sites. Cooperation—fostered by the organization of program operations that emphasize faculty engagement not only with program colleagues but also with other institutional players, including both faculty and administrators—can enable community college programs to overcome curricular and organizational complexity and can engender programming that is effective in fostering student achievement.

Consistency

The final conceptual condition, consistency, refers to the presence of a distinctive and stable pattern of program behaviors that promote regular interaction and collective events. Compared to the first three conceptual conditions, which are generally associated with educational practices from one domain more than the others, consistency is a more holistic condition. Data from this study indicate that many of the educational practices that foster cohesion, connection, or cooperation in these programs also lead to consistency. For example, the educational practices of the Fashion Program at Los Angeles Trade Tech or the Accelerated Careers in Technology program at Modesto Junior College that connect local industry, program administration, and faculty result in curricula for these respective programs that provide students with consistent experiences as they progress through program coursework and participate in program internships in preparation for entering the workforce. Similarly, the educational practices of the ESL program at San Francisco City College that foster coordination between faculty from multiple campuses to create and maintain an intricate ESL program provide students with consistent experiences as they progress from the various levels of the noncredit and credit ESL programs. These examples suggest that there are various paths to creating programs that offer positive and consistent experiences for students, and such consistency is important for programs that show promise in closing the achievement gap.

One example of cohesion leading to consistency is the Latino Center Adelante Program at Santa Monica College (Santa Monica College, n.d.) established in the 1980s. Meaning forward, ahead, or for the future, the Adelante Program is described as a ''success-oriented program focusing on academic achievement, transfer, cultural awareness, and personal growth'' (Santa Monica College, 2007, p. 16). One member of the support staff indicated that the Adelante Program's main purpose is to help Latino students build networks, eventually transfer to four-year institutions, and ''To make connections with key resources on campus so they can have the support . . . they need to accomplish their objective. We're really trying to help students make the transition for transfer . . . Definitely trying to have them maximize their time here.''

Adelante Program faculty and staff rely on several key program components to serve students, specifically academic counseling and tutoring. An enduring, cohesive culture of caring and support along with a tacit understanding of the interconnectedness of culture, knowledge, and power (Rhoads, 1999) are outstanding features of the Latino Program. Central to the development of this culture are the backgrounds of the program's counselors and the behaviors of its faculty. Counselors in the center are all bilingual, first-generation college students, and five out of the six counselors were once community college students. One counselor explained that sharing similar backgrounds with the students enables Latino Program counselors to understand what students need, and it increases their ability to create and maintain relationships with students:

> [We have] sensitivity to the cultural issues of the Latino community . . . the background, how the community works, their upbringing . . . not only just cultural issues . . . language issues. It's knowing and understanding the background of this group of students, and being able to connect with them.

The cultural and language similarities between counselors and students foster a cohesive atmosphere, enabling students to feel connected to the Latino Program and, in turn, the college at large. The cultural cohesion in the Adelante Program also extends to faculty associated with the program. Faculty members are selected to teach Adelante Program developmental and

college-level classes based on their demonstrated ability to connect with and engage Latino students. Although the classes follow the regular Santa Monica College course requirements, the selection of readings and discussion topics are geared toward the interests, background, and needs of Latino students. Priority registration is offered to Adelante Program students, ensuring that they are able to take their classes with an instructor sensitive to their particular histories and needs.

The result of these educational practices is the cultivation of consistency for the students. From the backgrounds of counselors and faculty to the content of the curriculum in Adelante classes, students are consistently surrounded by people who understand them and support their academic progress. Furthermore, these students are not dependent on interacting with a specific counselor or faculty member to gain and maintain a sense of belonging. Rather, they can alternate between counselors and move from class to class without losing comfort or support in that all program personnel and components work together to maintain consistent practices.

Consistency, then, is a holistic conceptual category that potentially incorporates the ecological, historical–cultural, and organizational domains of educational practice. As such, it often appears in community college programs in conjunction with the other components of the Four Cs. While the other conceptual categories capture the character of educational practices that may not directly address students (i.e., cohesive faculty cultures or cooperative committee structures), consistency refers to the characteristics of educational practices that directly touch students' lives as they progress through a program's curriculum or interact with program personnel. It is this salience to students' lives that makes consistency a significant ingredient for community college programs that show promise in closing the achievement gap.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE: TRANSFERRING PROMISING PRACTICES

The Four Cs conceptual model we developed reflects an acknowledgment of the special circumstances and local autonomy of community colleges for those institutions that consider adapting these promising practices. Cohesion, connection, cooperation, and consistency are conceptual generalizations of the characteristics of promising practices that help identify potential ways to facilitate transfer of practices. Based on this study, recommendations are offered for each conceptual condition. Several of these recommendations are not new to the literature but rather reinforce several traditional findings and conclusions about community college practice.

Cohesion

At first glance, the development of cohesive faculty or student cultures similar to those in our investigated programs may seem out of reach for most institutions. Organizational cultures take time to develop and grow (Tierney, 1991). However, one transferable practice that fosters cohesion is the hiring of faculty and support staff who are committed to, and have high expectations for, students; and if the particulars of the program are appropriate, these hires will have backgrounds that are similar to the students targeted by the program. Faculty members and support staff who meet these criteria may provide a community college program with a solid base of educational and social values from which a cohesive culture could develop. Both institutional governance and leadership need to be aligned to enable both policy and practices

to not only address students' needs—in the case of hiring of faculty—but also to support faculty and staff cohesion. Organizational literature in the 1980s and 1990s offered images of organizations where sharing of goals and experiences of institutional members was normative (Morgan, 2006).

Connection

Establishing and maintaining connections with external industries, organizations, and communities are crucial to the high level of performance of career and vocational community college programs. It is recommended that career and vocational programs hire faculty with industry experience but not faculty who lack appropriate academic credentials. This hiring practice ensures that programs have faculty who are knowledgeable of industry standards and are well-connected to industry officials, which, in turn, keeps program curriculum industry-relevant and creates more effective internship and job placement programs. It is also recommended that basic skills, ESL, and transfer programs take steps to connect incoming students, particularly underrepresented students, to their programs via bridge programs designed to introduce students to the college and the mechanisms of support they can find on campus.

Cooperation

Practices that structured interactions amongst faculty, between faculty and students, and between program personnel and external entities, as well as those practices that supported faculty status within their colleges, contributed to the development of cooperation. The specific manifestations of these practices vary depending on the specific needs and circumstances of individual college programs. Nonetheless, organizing interactions between program personnel in the form of committees and advisory boards was a common practice across all of this study's research sites. In career and vocational programs, these committees can incorporate individual actors from local industry, government, and community leadership positions to integrate and formalize connection practices into regular program operations. Participation in curriculum planning and governance activities gives program faculty control over program curriculum, integrates program faculty that may otherwise have little contact because they work at different campuses, and helps solidify a community college program's status in the wider college setting.

Consistency

Consistency is a holistic conceptual category that characterizes promising practices that also cultivate cohesion, connection, or cooperation. Depending on the specific institutional contexts or program aims, different combinations of educational practices may ultimately develop consistency. However, the authors offer two general recommendations for community college programs to follow.

First, in all promising practices in this study, multiple individuals worked together in numerous organizational settings on a continual basis to create these promising practices. Thus, we recommend that community college practitioners and decision makers treat the issue of educating all students with continual and consistent attention. We also suggest that practitioners devote more attention to how the different components of community college programs work together to contribute to the overall functioning of the program. Second, consistency can just

as easily develop in a negative fashion, and if it does, it can hinder educational practices. Therefore, we recommend that community college programs not only hire the right personnel but also incorporate ways to monitor and support program climate to maintain consistently functional practices.

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed important relationships between the domains of educational practice and the characteristics of promising practices at five community colleges in California. It was found that ecological educational practices predominately factored in the development of connection, historical-cultural practices in the development of cohesion, and organizational practices in the development of cooperation at these institutions. Consistency, a more holistic conceptual category, was connected to all domains of educational practice at these institutions.

This investigation has substantial implications for community college researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who search for effective programs, practices, and processes to improve community college effectiveness in serving students, especially those from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. This study indicates that across the included sites there are key elements of program effectiveness. Specifically, it is suggested that in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles to the improvement of student outcomes in community colleges articulated by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Levin, 2007; Shulock & Moore, 2007), the development and functioning of these conditions—cohesion, connection, cooperation, and consistency—in instructional programs on a larger scale can help to overcome adversity faced by students with disadvantaged backgrounds and those identified as underrepresented minorities.

There is an extensive range of practices that can be characterized by each of the four conceptual categories for promising practices. More research and theorizing are needed to develop understanding of the ways in which program components combine to foster student achievement. Research and theorizing are also needed to test the basic hypothesis that community college programs need educational practices that lead to some combination of cohesion, connection, and cooperation to attain consistency. Developing these qualities could enable community college programs to show promise in closing the achievement gap.

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